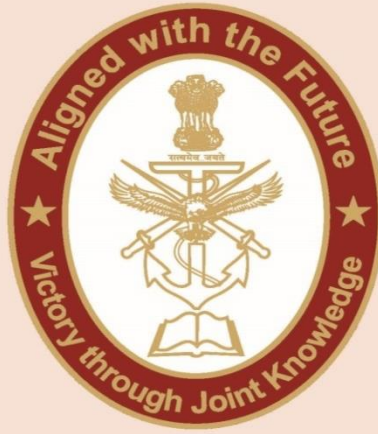


CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



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GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF EASTERN LADAKH



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Introduction

The Sino-Indian border dispute has been a historical one, and continues to be the root cause of skirmishes between the two civilisational states. India shares 3,488 km (MHA) of her border with China, which can be divided into three sectors – The eastern sector, the middle sector, and the Western sector. The Eastern Sector stretches for around 1325 km, comprising the region between Sikkim and Lohit district of Arunachal. The middle sector comprises of a 545 km boundary between Demchok, Ladakh in the north to the Nepal border in the South. The Western sector, which is also the focus of this paper, runs from the Karakoram Pass in the north to Demchok in the South and borders the 'Aksai Chin' Plateau – which is the centre of the dispute in the Western sector, or the larger region of 'Eastern Ladakh'.

In the ancient times, Ladakh was a land of connectivity, being located at the ancient Silk Route passing through it. The region has played a significant role in the development of culture, trade, commerce, and also the building of international relations amongst the neighbouring areas. The conflict has its roots in the evolution of the frontier that was the Tibetan area to a disputed border that both countries interpret differently.

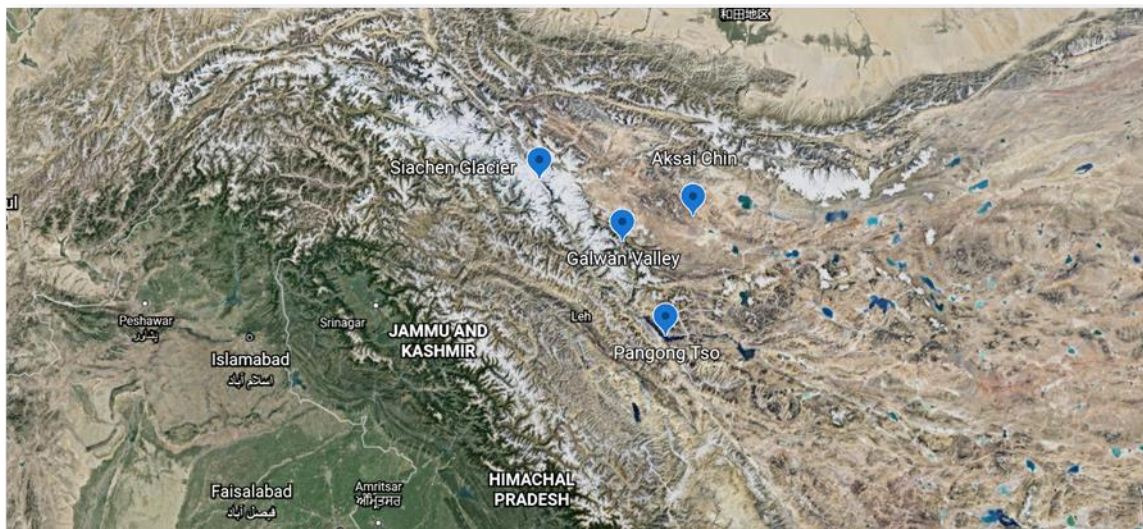
The Aksai Chin area is a large disputed territory between India and China. This paper will talk about this 'Western Sector', its history and developments from the beginning of the dispute during the British rule in India. It is essential to navigate the various agreements that took place and the developments of the relationship between the two nations and its leaders in order to understand how the western sector and Aksai Chin – two regions with extremely inhospitable topography and close to zero inhabitation – come to be so crucial in the Sino-India relations.

Strategic Geography of Eastern Ladakh

To understand why Eastern Ladakh was taken into the Indian territory, one can go back to the recommendations of Sir John Ardagh, the former British Director of Military Intelligence. The British Indian establishment considered a frontier of barren and inhospitable terrain between India and hostile Russia (1898). Ardagh suggested to define a demarcation along the Kun-Lun Mountains, where the present Survey of India maps draw the Indian boundary. His idea was to have a difficult terrain on India's side for strategic reasons. The inaccessibility of such a region would act as an extended barrier against external forces. But owing to the topography of what is now known as 'Eastern Ladakh', to define the frontier was a challenging task. Since the trade, culture and people-to-people intercourse between Tibet and Ladakh functioned almost without any barriers, there was nothing to demarcate the area along geography. In the north-eastern corner of Ladakh, the region which is the focus of this paper, therefore, there was no actual habitation, or physical occupation. In fact, the Chinese administrative or physical presence was not even in existence (Rao, 2021, p. 338). Two watersheds were finally considered – both lying to the east of the Karakoram Pass. The first was the Karakoram range, running in a south-eastern direction, and the second was the Kunlun Mountains, stretching towards the east and more importantly, taking in the Aksai Chin plateau. The latter was chosen to signify India's international frontier, although a clear 'boundary' did not come up till 1954. The Indian side sent across a map, to which there was no Chinese response, making this decision unilateral. (Rao, 2021, p. 339). This boundary given by the Indian side in 1954 is what we see in the official maps of India today.

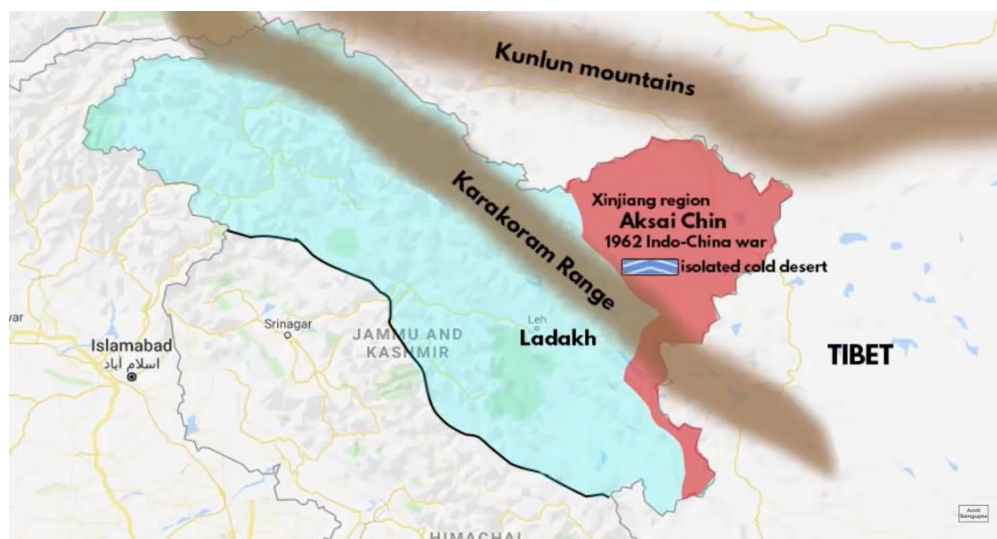
Geographically speaking, Eastern Ladakh is a continuation of the plateau that hosts Tibet; and there is no natural geographical barrier between the Ladakh and Tibet regions. Owing to that, the cultural and people-to-people links since ancient times have been exceptionally strong between Tibet and Ladakh. In the nineteenth century, the region was politically integrated into the dominion of Maharaja of Kashmir which caused a political division in the geographically integrated region. In this section, four particular

topographical features are discussed – Aksai Chin plateau, Galwan Valley, Siachen Glacier, and Pangong Tso Lake.



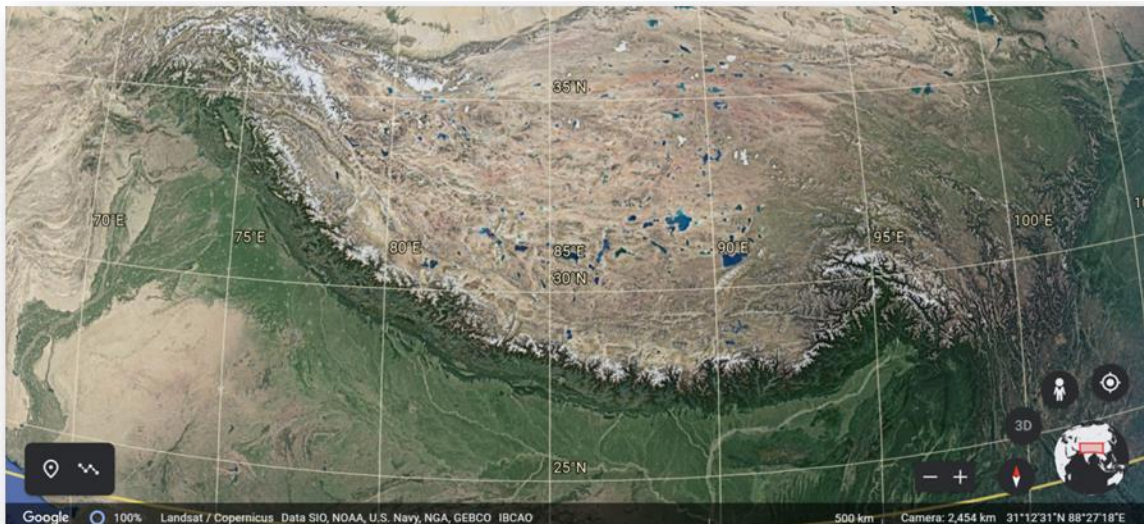
Map 1: Siachen Glacier, Galwan Valley, Aksai Chin and Pangong Tso Lake (Source: Google Earth)

While the first two are part of the western sector, the Siachen is a strategic location which can be accessed via the Karakoram range that borders Eastern Ladakh to the west (Rao, 2021, p. 338). Its importance lies in its location between two ‘frontiers’ and is crucial to the China-Pakistan nexus that threatens India with a two-front war. Pangong Tso, while not a new factor, has gained more importance in recent times after the April-May 2020 stand-off between India and China (Kaushik, 2021). Pangong Tso became the theatre of face-off between the troops of the two countries, with China attempting to encroach areas along the lake where Indian troops were positioned. It is essential to understand each of these geographical entities separately to study Eastern Ladakh from a geopolitical perspective.



Map 2: Aksai Chin (Picture source: Amit Sengupta, 2020)

Aksai Chin, the centre of the Sino-Indian dispute in the western sector, is an isolated cold desert at an average elevation of almost 5000 m ASL, located in Eastern Ladakh. It shares a political border with the Tibet region, that is presently claimed and governed by China. Tibet and Aksai Chin are part of the same topographical stretch of a plateau and fall on the rain-shadow side of the Karakoram range in the Himalayas. There is no geographical feature that separates the two regions.

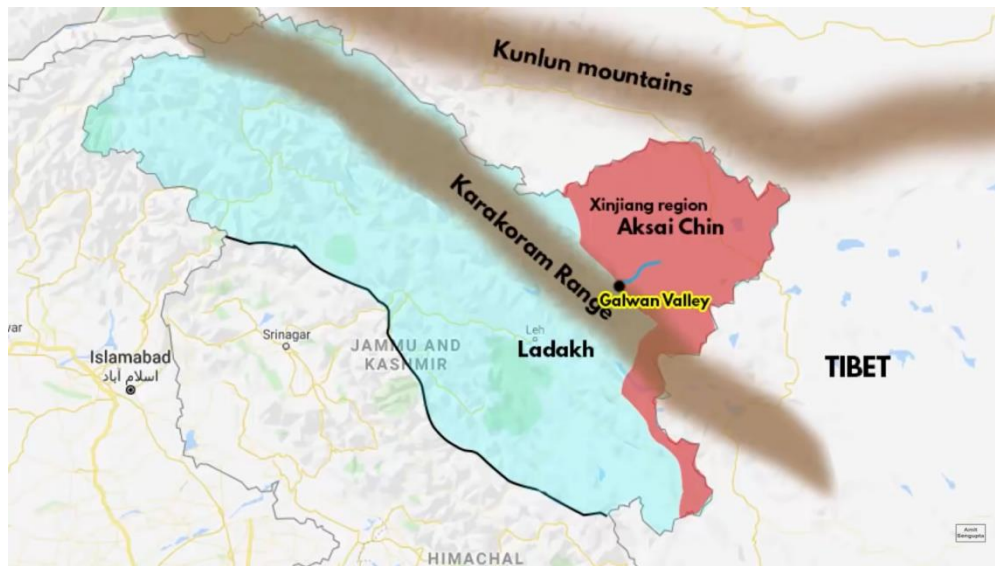


Map 3: Tibet (Source: Google Earth, 2022)

If the history of the region is studied, then it is noted that since ancient times, a certain coexistence has been observed between Ladakh and Tibet. This coexistence rests on the belief that a customary boundary was established since ancient times. Like the Tibetans, Ladakhis were also Buddhists, and further shared with them religious and social customs, language, and attire (Rao, 2021, pp. 338-339). This commonality of the two regions is evident when seen from a geographical and cultural lens.

The 2020 stand-off at the Eastern Ladakh frontier caused a new but increasingly important region to come to limelight – the Galwan Valley. The Galwan conflict was the first instance of violence that occurred in the region.

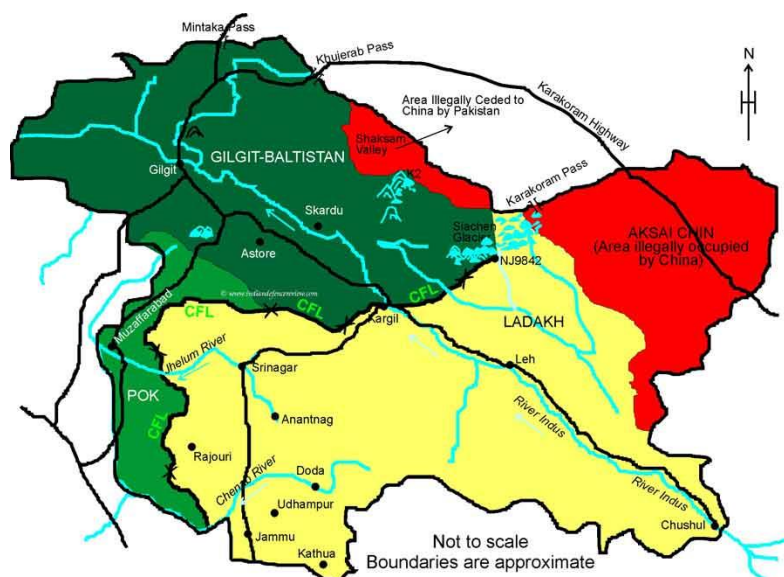
The geography of Galwan Valley is another factor that needs to be studied in order to understand how exactly the strategic importance of the region. The Galwan River originates from Aksai Chin and flows towards the Ladakh region. The valley made by this river connects the Ladakh region in India to the Aksai Chin plateau. The importance of this valley becomes clear if the location of the river is considered. The Karakoram ranges, which separate the Ladakh Plateau from Aksai Chin, have an average elevation of about 6000 mts and are a tough terrain to navigate. To access Aksai Chin, therefore, there is only the Galwan Valley. This access point is of great strategic importance to China in order to keep control over the Aksai Chin region.



Map 4: Galwan Valley (Picture Source: Amit Sengupta, 2020)

A road that was built in the 1950s by PRC, from the Xingjiang Uyghur Autonomous region to the Tibet Autonomous region, also passes through this disputed territory of Aksai Chin. This makes the location of Galwan Valley of even greater significance geostrategically as the control of Galwan Valley in the hands of India would mean that she could pose a direct threat to the G219 Xinjiang – Tibet Road. On the other hand, if China has control of Galwan Valley, then the Chinese position at Aksai Chin remains defensible.

The next geographical factor that can be looked at is the Siachen Glacier. Lying at the junction of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir and Aksai Chin, the highest point of this glacier is at 5753 km.



Map 5: Gilgit Baltistan, Sakshgam Valley, Siachen Glacier (Source: Indian Defence Review 2013)

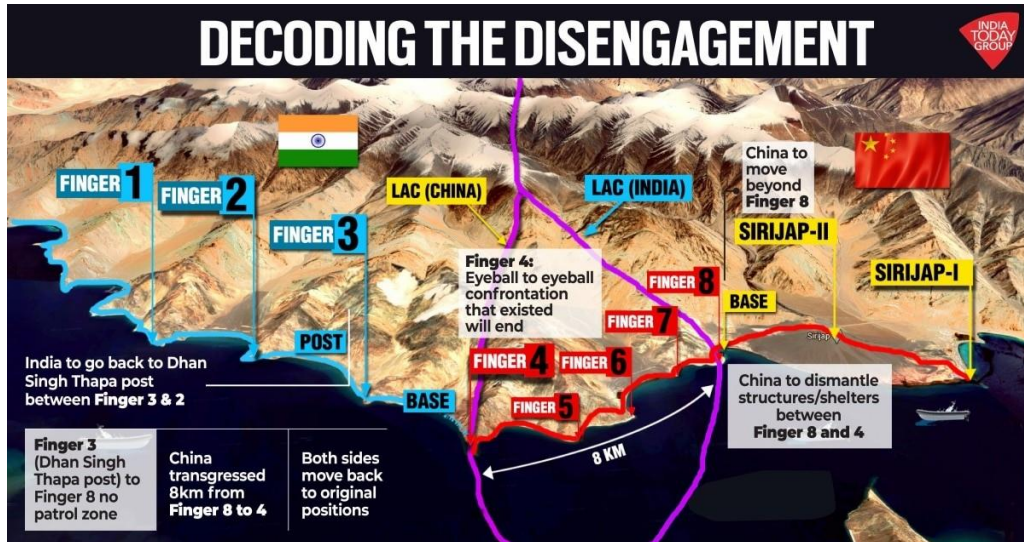
Siachen is commonly called the world's highest – and costliest – battlefield. Siachen serves as a break in the military linkage between the two fronts. It is also directly connected to Shaksgam valley and Gilgit Baltistan – serving as a watchtower for both areas. India took control of Siachen in April 1984, after Indian Army received intelligence that Pakistan might be attempting to capture this unoccupied and harsh terrain. Siachen's elevation gives this the status of a security post to watch over the developments of its surrounded disputed areas. Specifically, it serves the purpose of keeping an eye on the Chinese activities in the ceded territory of Shaksgam and keeps China from gaining further advantage from its position in Aksai Chin.

Pangong Tso Lake, which is popular in India after being featured in the climax of the Bollywood movie '3 Idiots' (2009), has critical geopolitical significance in the India-China border dispute.. Pangong Tso is the highest saltwater lake in the world, situated at an altitude of over 14,000 feet. It stretches for about 135 km, and is an endorheic lake¹.



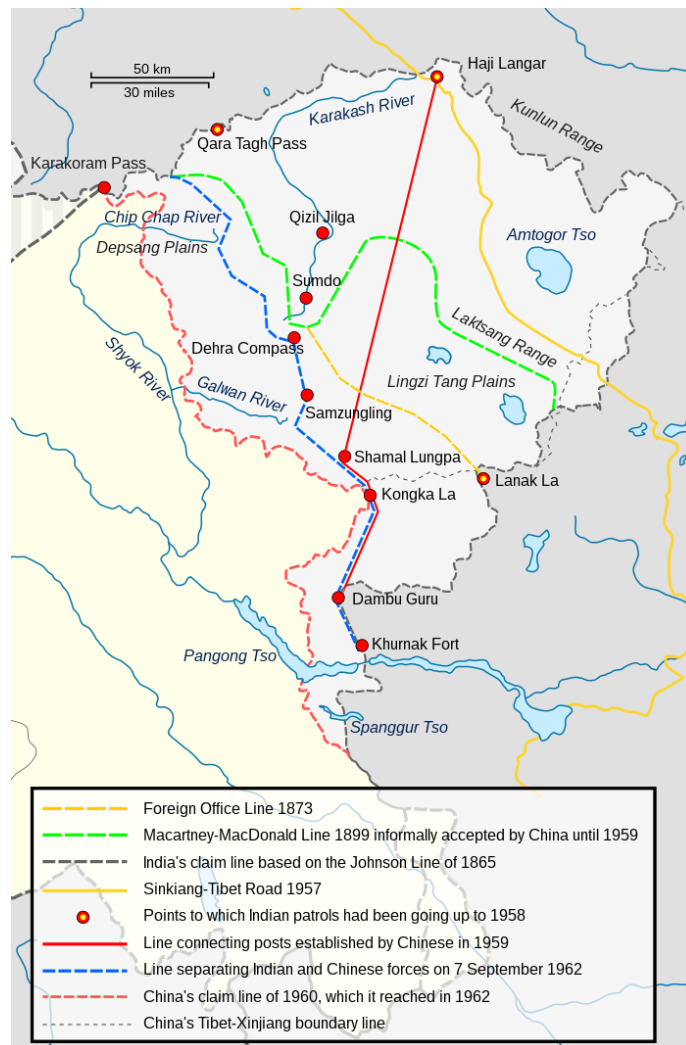
Map 6: Pangong Tso Lake (Source: Google Earth, 2021)

Since May 2020, it has been the site of a confrontation between the Indian and Chinese troops. This scuffle, that occurred in May and resulted in Lieutenant General-level talks, also included Galwan Valley, Demchok and Daulat Beg Oldie. The focus of the dispute, however, continued to be on Pangong Tso. The Line of Actual Control (LAC) passes through the lake. This line runs along the land in most areas, with the exception of Pangong Tso. Here, it runs through the salty water body (Dutta, 2020). Pangong Tso is also where what are known commonly as the 8 fingers are located. They are the interlocking spurs of the Chang Chenmo valley that are jutting out into the Pangong Tso lake, and used as patrolling points by the Indian and Chinese troops.



Map 7: 8 fingers on Pangong Tso (Source: India Today, 2020)

Evolution of the Eastern Ladakh Dispute



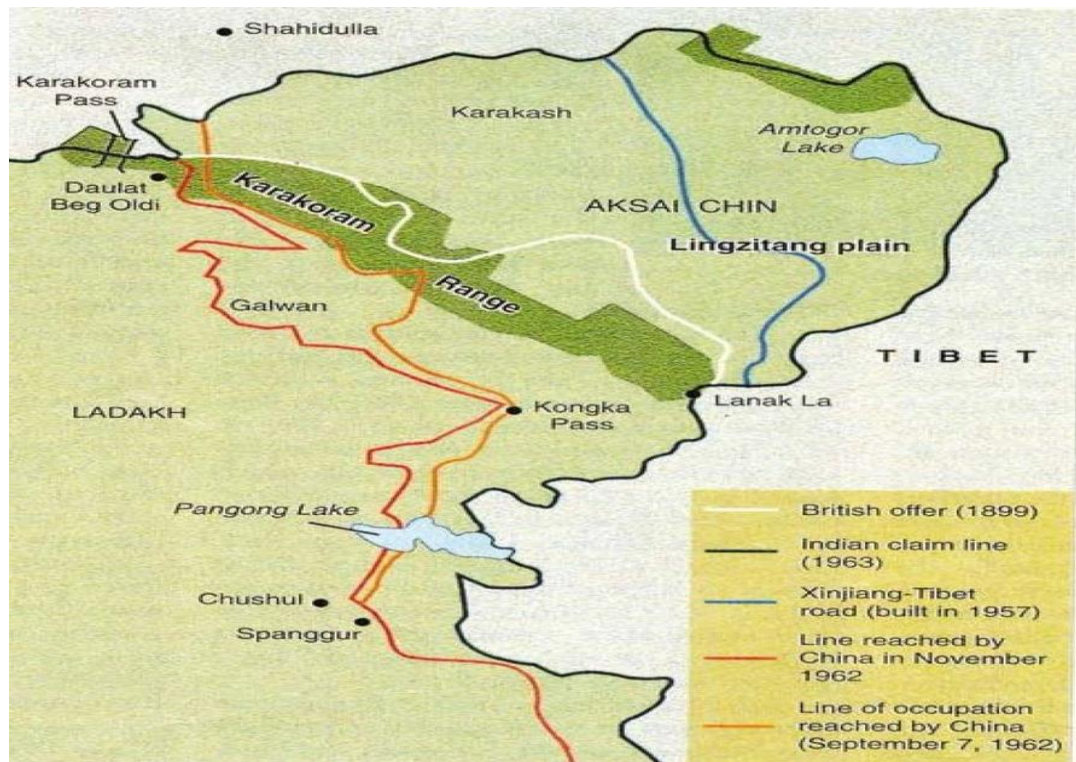
Map 8: Indian Claim Line (based on Johnson Line 1865) and Chinese Claim lines (Source: Air Power Asia, 2020)

This dispute is centred around the Aksai Chin area, and is almost as old as the inception of India as an independent nation. Today's border conflict is majorly a dispute over two boundaries that were never part of any binding bilateral treaty between India and China. The Johnson line (1865) indicates that Aksai Chin is within the Indian territory, while the Macdonald Line (1895) places it within the political boundary of China (refer Map 8). Both these lines were conceptualised and put forth by the British. The 1865 Johnson Line was put forth to the Tibetan government, and the Chinese counterparts had not been involved. Whereas when the McCartney-McDonald line was proposed, China never gave a response (Noorani, 2011). The Aksai Chin area, without a definitive demarcation, therefore, became a breeding ground for conflict. The 1962 war was a major setback in Sino-Indian relations and ended with Chinese occupation up to the Chinese Claim Line of 1960.

While the history of the Indo-Tibetan border can be traced back to even the 1800s, perhaps a clearer perspective is formed if our starting point is the post-independence era. The Indian Independence Act was enacted by the British Parliament in 1947. The act primarily specified which 'territories' that were to be part of the independent Dominion of India and which were to constitute the Dominion of Pakistan. A.G. Noorani (2011) says that independent India was the successor to British India; Pakistan was the seceding state. In other words, no definitive boundaries were drawn, instead only certain areas were allotted to the two independent Dominions (Zaidi, 2006, p. 79).

A November 1959 publication by the MEA's Historical Divisionⁱⁱ stated that 'India's northern frontier is a traditional one, in the sense that it has lain approximately where it is now for nearly three thousand decades. In both the cases – of the eastern sector and the western sector, the independent India inherited the boundaries that existed on August 14, 1947, under the British Raj.' In 1914, the eastern sector's boundary was defined by the McMahon Line, but no such thing was done for the Western sector. In 1959, when the boundary dispute was first raised explicitly, the Treaty between Tibet and Ladakh, 1842 came to light.

The Persian version of the Treaty, that came into force after the Dogra-Tibetan war (1841-42) states, "...there shall be no transgression and no interference in the country beyond the old-established frontiers." (Mehta, 1992, pp. 167-70). The Treaty only talked about an 'agreed' frontier, and no definitive geographical boundary – leaving the border open to dispute yet again. When the Treaty was referred to in 1959, the relevance was perhaps overestimated, as the Treaty was not a boundary Treaty, but in fact a Treaty of peace and friendship (Charak, 1983, p. 108). The phrase 'old established frontiers' was accepted by both the parties – the Ladakhi and the Tibetans. The Boundary Commission (1846) attempted to define



Map 9: A close up of Aksai Chin (Source: Nitin Gupta, Twitter)

The Indian claim rests on the fact that the Chang Chenmo valley (to the east of which the Lanak Pass lies; refer map 9), was a part of the British Indian Empire. The Chinese claim line has a geographical basis, and runs parallel to the Karakoram range from the Ane Pass in Pangong Tso to the Karakoram Pass in the north.

To the North of the Chang Chenmo-Pangong Tso divide, the area is a cold, elevated desert, and as mentioned earlier, an extension of the Tibetan plateau, called Aksai Chin. This area holds great military and strategic importance, and is the extreme north east portion of this disputed territory (Lamb, 1964, p. 77). However, in the mid-twentieth century, Aksai Chin gained significance and became a central point in the boundary dispute. Here, it should be noted that Aksai Chin's dispute began after the 1950s- when the Indian maps with definitive demarcation were sent out to the Indian embassies by Prime Minister Nehru. The boundary lines included both Aksai Chin and the Chang Chenmo Valley in the Indian territory. In 1954, the maps were published, using the Johnson Line as the North eastern boundary (Noorani, 2011, p. 33). To this, the Chinese gave

no response, as mentioned earlier and the boundary became a unilateral decision on the part of India.

But from this point forth, India-China relations began to decline. Unbeknownst to the Indian leadership, the Chinese began a construction in the 1950s (refer Map 9). It was a highway running from Xin Jiang province to the Tibet region, crossing right through the eastern portion of Aksai Chin – a territory claimed by India. In 1958, China published maps that used the McCartney-McDonald Line to include Aksai Chin in the Chinese territory, and also the road construction which was named NH G219. These were the leading years up to the 1962 war. Both the diplomatic moves by means of cartographic aggression were bold, and in 1950-51, post the Chinese Occupation of Tibet, the ‘frontier’ that Tibet was, fell to China. Now India shared a direct border with a Chinese-administered Tibet and faced increased chances of conflict.

In 1954, after the Agreement on the Tibet Region between India and China, and the codification of the ‘Panchsheel Principles’, the Indian leadership was confident that there was to be no further disagreement on the boundary. Nirupama Rao (2021), states that this ‘delusional diplomacy’ is what proved costly for India. The diplomatic relations between Nehru and Zhou Enlai quickly unravelled after 1959, when Dalai Lama was offered sanctuary within Indian territory. On August 28, 1959, Nehru addressed the Lok Sabha, mentioning the road that China had built across Aksai Chin, expressing his ambiguities about the lack of demarcation of the area in the past. In 1954, his stance had been that ‘India’s border with China is fixed and well-determined and not open to discussion’. The 1959 address was a contradiction to this. Zhou Enlai then accused India of having ‘inherited the policy of British imperialism’.ⁱⁱⁱ

Former Foreign Secretary, Subimal Dutt remarked that the access and presence of Indian troops along the border were rather difficult. The topography was vastly in favour of the Chinese – with virtually no geographical barrier obstructing their entry into Aksai Chin. Whereas, the Indian troops had to scale the inhospitable Karakorum ranges to reach the area. Moreover, the Chinese never defined this as a frontier, but indicated a line on their map – and even that has shifted numerous times. By the various direct conflicts, they aim to occupy the area up to their claim line (Dutt, 1959). India has since adhered to the line that she has defined geographically, and politically. The Chinese occupation is seen as an aggressor state’s strategy in Aksai Chin. This dispute has seeped into the 21st century with little progress, making the international community question the intentions of the states to finally settle the border dispute and draw a definitive boundary.

In August and October 1959, two bloody clashes took place – first at Longju and the second at the Kongka Pass. The August conflict at Longju (refer Map 10) was the first time the two sides directly engaged in fire. This was a month after India had informed the Chinese side of air dropping a doctor to the Longju, and receiving the response “not necessary to bring activities in Indian territory to their notice” (Kalha, 2014, p. 101). Clearly, the August clash was a deviation from this statement as the Chinese personnel crossed to the south of McMahon Line.



Map 10: Longju La Pass, Eastern Sector (Source: Times of India)



Map 11: Kongka La, Western Sector (Source: Air Power Asia)

The Kongka La (refer Map 11) clash took place in Ladakh, and that was the first instance of direct battle on the western sector. Five Indian police personnel were killed (Kalha, 2014, p. 104). The Chinese had begun to encroach steadily to the west of India's claimed boundary and the Aksai Chin Plateau. They took positions dangerously close to the Ladakhi heartland and passes that provided access to south-eastern Ladakh from Tibet (Rao, 2021, p. 327). All these developments also made the Indian public resent China. The pressure of the public opinion as well as what was being called the 'Chinese betrayal', Nehru suffered disillusionment and faced a roadblock in his strategy towards the Chinese threat.

Nirupama Rao (2021), former foreign secretary says that in the early years of the constitution of PRC, securing the peripheries of the disputed regions was a strategic necessity for them. Since Tibet was occupied militarily, infrastructural links and connectivity became crucial to the isolated desert. China used stealth to secure its position in eastern Ladakh, whereas India neglected to physically assert the claims she had made on maps, over Aksai Chin. This mistake cost the years of negotiations when it seemed that perhaps a solution could be reached to the India-China border dispute.



Map 12: Line of Actual Control as seen by China today (Source: The Hindu)

From earlier that year, India had begun to develop what would later to be called its 'Forward Policy' in the western sector. In November 1959, after the increasing clashes, Zhou Enlai penned a letter to Nehru, which referred to, for the first time, to a 'line of actual control' – but the letter had no map attached to it, therefore giving no clarity as to where this LAC fell, just that it was based on the MacMahon Line.

quo by any means. In order to maintain effectively the status quo of the border between the two countries, to ensure the tranquillity of the border regions and to create a favourable atmosphere for a friendly settlement of the boundary question, the Chinese Government proposes that the armed forces of China and India each withdraw 20 kilometres at once from the so-called McMahon Line in the east, and from the line up to which each side exercises actual control in the west, and that the two sides undertake to refrain from again sending their armed personnel to be stationed in and patrol the zones from which they have evacuated their armed forces, but still maintain civil administrative personnel and unarmed police there for the performance of administrative duties and maintenance of order. This proposal is in effect an extension of the Indian Government's proposal contained in its note

Figure 1: "Premier Chou En-lai's [Zhou Enlai's] Letter to Prime Minister Nehru," November 07, 1959

The Indian response to this letter was asking China to position its troops to the east of the Indian **claim line** and for India to withdraw its troops to the west of the Chinese **claim line** (refer **Figure 2**), which was still not clearly demarcated.

That would put a substantial distance between the two troops, reducing the risk of a direct clash by manifold. Earlier that year, in March, Dalai Lama's escape and asylum in India had already stirred Chinese concern.

14. I suggest, therefore, that in the Ladakh area, both our Governments should agree on the following as an interim measure. The Government of India should withdraw all personnel to the west of the line which the Chinese Government have shown as the international boundary in their 1956 maps which, so far as we are aware are their latest maps. Similarly, the Chinese Government should withdraw their personnel to the east of the international boundary which has been described by the Government of India in their earlier notes and correspondence and shown in their official maps. Since the two lines are separated by long distances, there should not be the slightest risk of border clashes between the forces on either side. The area is almost entirely uninhabited. It is thus not necessary to maintain administrative personnel in this area bounded by the two lines on the east and the west.

Figure 2: Prime Minister Nehru's letter to the Prime Minister of China, November 16, 1959

The result of this communication is that moving towards the end of the 20th century, China's perception was that the LAC ran 2000 km long, with the entire Aksai Chin lying within their area, and excluding the eastern and middle sectors from this line. India on the other hand claimed the LAC to run 3,488 km, calling the entire border from the Karakoram Pass to Lohit in Arunachal as the LAC.

The Sino-Indian war was a result of these building tensions. It broke out in October 1962, and lasted a month till 21 November, 1962 – when China declared a unilateral ceasefire. The tensions that culminated into this war were more than just the border dispute that was seen on the surface. Firstly, China was afraid of the threat that India posed to its rule in Tibet. The asylum granted to Dalai Lama reinforced the fear and then leader Mao Zedong also stated that the Lhasa rebellion (1959 Tibetan uprising) was a result of Indian actions. Secondly, the failure of Indian leadership to assert the territory that would have kept Eastern Ladakh under the Indian administration; India never deployed troops the way China did on the Aksai Chin border. China used the comparatively easier access to the region and used military and infrastructure to occupy the region. Thirdly, the 1954 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' were taken as the final word on the border issue by the Indian leadership. The desire to crush the issue as quickly and peacefully as possible drove the Indian leadership to maintain a soft approach towards China. Finally, India's lack of infrastructure development in the region allowed the infrastructural war that China had already declared in the 1950s with the Xingjiang – Tibet Highway. The first offensive was dealt by China – and India's lack of preparation as well as the inherent belief that a war with China could not take place became the downfall in the 1962 conflict. While the war ceased with China's unilateral declaration of a ceasefire, the Indian side had suffered a psychological defeat. In January 2022, a new history of the 1962 war was published by China, compiled under the supervision of Zhang Xiaokang, daughter of a former PLA General. It states that the actions of China in 1962 were a 'counter attack' in response to India's continued claim of territory. It states that the attack was simply 'a manoeuvre to bring India to the negotiating table' (Krishnan, 2022).

In March 1963, the Shaksgam Valley, a part of the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, was ceded to China by Pakistan. This area between the northern Kashmir and Xingjiang region was crucial to both the sides owing its borders with Siachen and Gilgit-Baltistan.



Map 13: Gilgit Baltistan, Sakshgam Valley & Aksai Chin in Map of Erstwhile state of J&K (Source: India Post, 2020)

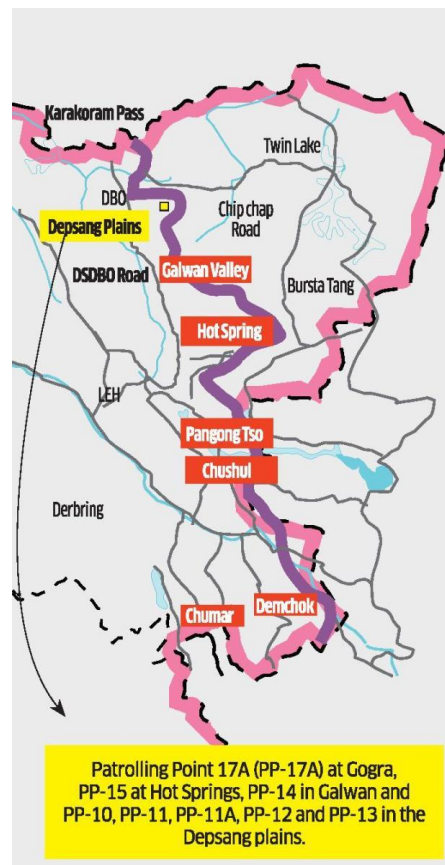
Five bilateral treaties have so far existed between India and China addressing the border disputes. The first was the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India China Border Areas (1993). It states that:

“The two sides are of the view that the India-China boundary question shall be resolved through peaceful and friendly consultations. Neither side shall use or threaten to use force against the other by any means. Pending an ultimate solution to the boundary question between the two countries, the two sides shall strictly respect and observe the LAC between the two sides. No activities of either side shall overstep the LAC. In case personnel of one side cross the LAC, upon being cautioned by the other side, they shall immediately pull back to their own side of the LAC. When necessary, the two sides shall jointly check and determine the segments of the LAC where they have different views as to its alignment”

The second major agreement was the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas (1996). This agreement invoked the five principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence to foster a long-term good-neighbourly relationship. The third is the establishment of Protocol between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Modalities for the Implementation of Confidence Building Measures in

the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas (2005). It reiterates some of the points agreed to during 1993 and 1996. In 2012, there was the establishment of a Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on the India-China Border Affairs. It dealt largely with the timely communication of information on the border situation. Finally, in 2013 there was the Border Defense Cooperation Agreement between India and China. (Kumar, 2020).

In the past 45 years, the deadliest clash occurred in 2020. There was a violent clash in May on the northern bank of the Pangong Tso Lake. 20 Indian soldiers were martyred in this clash when the Chinese troops attacked the Indian side with stones, nail-studded clubs and exchanged blows. The other areas that saw military action between May-June 2020 were Galwan Valley, Hot Springs (PP14, an Indian military post), and PP15.

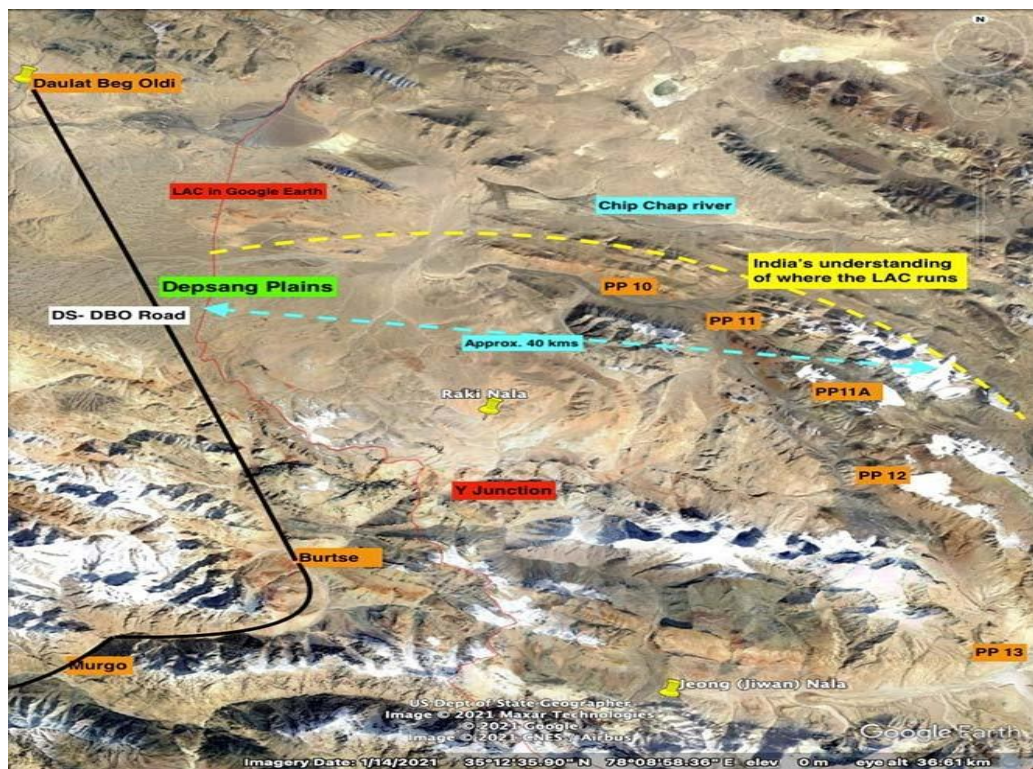


Map 14: The India-China Stand-off (Source: Deccan Herald)

In the Dipsang Plains area, the Y-junction was blockaded by the PLA, obstructing the India patrol to Patrol Points (PPs) 10, 11, 11A, 12 and 13 (refer Map 16). Another area that saw some action was the Kurgang river valley, where the Chinese troops moved beyond the Chinese claim line and obstructed access to PP15 and PP16. Their troops took positions at Hot Springs (refer Map 15).



Map 15: Hot Springs and Kurgang River Valley (Source: Manoj Joshi, ORF, 2021)



Map 16: Depsang Blockade (Manoj Joshi, ORF, June 2021)

The Galwan standoff was the result of constant military build-up at the entrance of the valley. These recent conflicts have brought the importance of the strategic geography of Eastern Ladakh into time-light once again and the next section explores the current significance of the region in Sino-Indian relations.

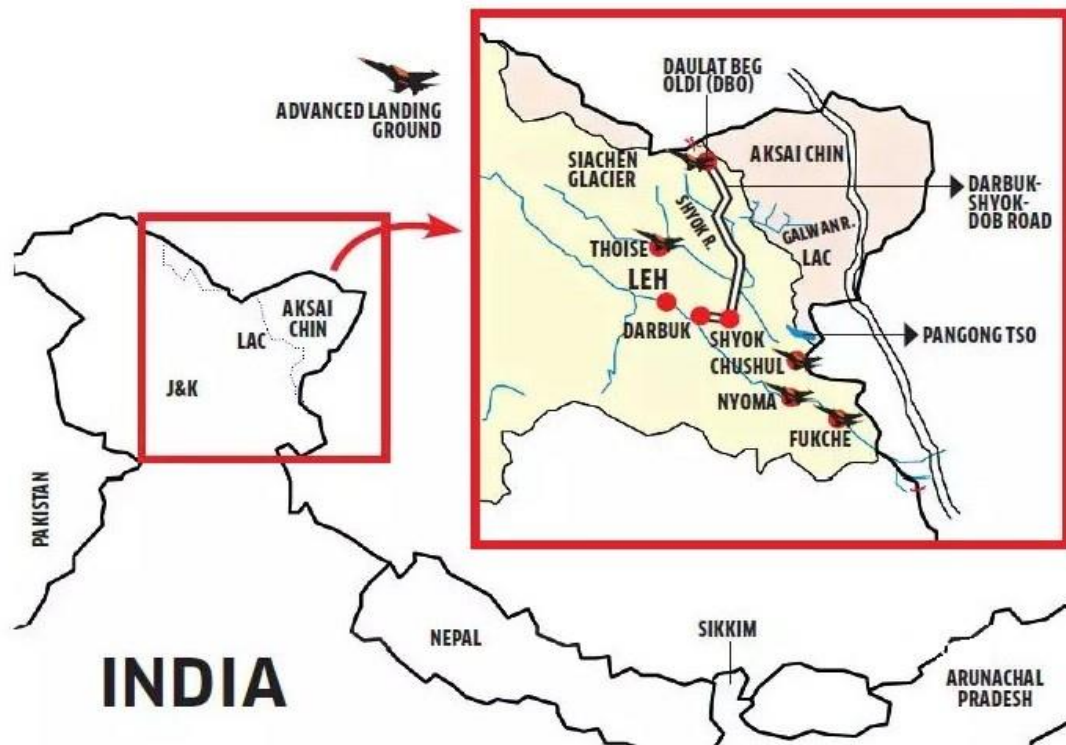
Role of Infrastructural Development in Eastern Ladakh



Map 17: The LAC flashpoints and Geopolitical Significance of Eastern Ladakh (Source; The Print)

The Eastern Ladakh region holds immense significance in the Sino-Indian relations. And with the aforementioned discussion on the region, the geography of Eastern Ladakh, especially that of Aksai Chin cannot be ignored when India draws out a military strategy for her defence in the Western Sector.

Chinese aggression close to the LAC is centred around the topographical features discussed earlier – Aksai Chin, Galwan Valley and Pangong Tso. The most recent being the latter two, and Aksai Chin being the region that China aims to continue asserting dominance over. Pangong Tso lies somewhere in the centre of the 826 km long disputed border in eastern Ladakh (Singh, 2020). A major aim of the Chinese activity around Pangong Tso can be the fear of infrastructure development by India around the LAC. Any infrastructure, specifically transport-related will be a threat to the Chinese occupation of Aksai Chin – in particular the Xinjiang-Tibet highway, or G219 road built between 1951-57 (Tibet Travel, 2019).



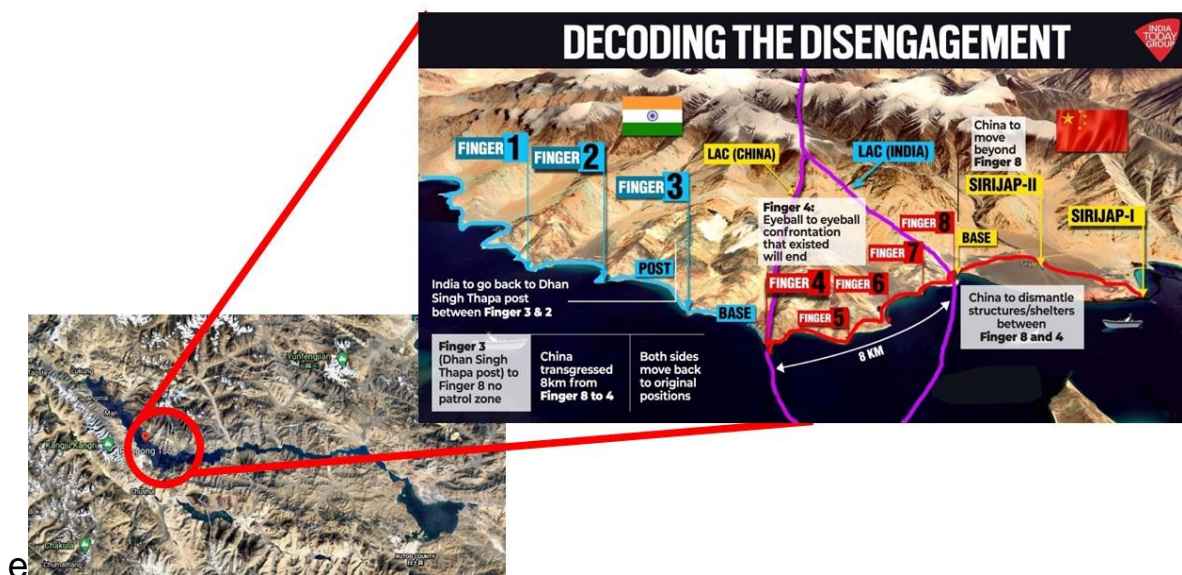
Map 18: Darbuk-Shyok - Daulat Beg Oldie Road (Source: Google Images)

In 2019, the Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) Road, a 255km all-weather road connecting Daulat Beg Oldie near the northern border to Leh, was completed. The road runs through Darbuk and Shyok villages. The road was inaugurated in 2019, and built by India's Border Road Organisation (BRO) over two decades. It runs through the Karakoram elevations ranging from 13,000 ft – 16,000 ft. The road provides access to the Indian military to the portion of the G219 highway that crosses Aksai Chin. There are also other strategic considerations in the region. To the west of DBO is the Pakistan occupied Gilgit-Baltistan area, and the region where China is constructing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in the Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). This also happens to be the region where Pakistan ceded over 5,000 sq. km area (Sakshgam Valley) of PoK to China in 1963 (Subramanian, 2020).

The DBO area (refer Map 17) near the northern border is termed as Sub-Sector North (SSN) by Indian Army. It is the highest airfield in the world (Dutt, 1959). The DSDBO road connects Leh to the Karakoram Pass. The construction began in 2000 and faced multiple objections from China, however, India did not stop the construction of the road. The road runs parallel to LAC, and the Shyok river, and will help in faster deployment of Army troops in the area. Earlier, the only other way of transporting the troops was through Advanced Landing Ground (ALG), and that could only be accessed through heavy-lift aircraft. It has also reduced the travel time from Leh to DBO from 2 days to six hours (Javaid, 2020). The DSDBO

road, is therefore critical to Indian security in the Western Sector. It runs close to the mouth of Galwan Valley (called PP14^{iv}), where the conflict took place in 2020, and poses a threat to the Chinese troops at the entrance of the valley. On May 21, 2020, Chinese troops entered the Galwan valley – as an obstruction to a road construction by India. Galwan was also the site of the June 2020 clash when 20 Indian soldiers were martyred. The road in question is expected to branch off from the DSDBO road and lead into Galwan Valley – further encroaching into the region where the Chinese troops are positioned (Gilani, 2020). These road constructions make the Eastern Ladakh region more accessible, specifically causing a threat to China's asserted dominance in Aksai Chin. The lake lies directly in the route of the Chushul approach – a path that China can very well use to launch an offensive against India. The Chinese have built functioning roads along the Pangong Tso. This is an indication of the strategic importance that the area holds for the Chinese, and consequently, for the Indian troops as well.

PANGONG TSO – 8 FINGERS



Map 19: Finger 5 was the site of Clash, post-which Chinese Patrols began to move upto Finger 2

The site of the June skirmish was the lake's northern bank. This is an eastern extension of the Karakoram Range. These particular interlocking spurs at Pangong Tso are often called the '8 fingers' by the Indian Army (Singh, 2020). Finger 5 of these was the site of the confrontation in May 2020. In the years after independence, India has maintained that the LAC runs through Finger 8, and the Indian forces patrolled upto Finger 8. China has the stance that the LAC passes through Finger 2, and has patrols running up to Finger 4, and occasionally till Finger 2. Pangong Tso is also strategically important due to its proximity to Chusul Valley, one of the battlegrounds in the 1962 war (Kaushik, 2021).

China, being an aggressor and revisionist state, has continuously attempted to push back on India's claims and activities of military forces, which did not violate mutual agreements. While peaceful negotiations continue to be the preferred method, China's expansionist policies do not seem to be budging at all in favour of either compromise or establishment of peace along the border. With the fear of a full-fledged conflict looming over the soldiers stationed in the Western sector, India has to take into consideration the geographical links between Aksai Chin, Siachen and the Pakistan-administered Gilgit-Baltistan region.

Conclusion

In the coming years, China and India will gain great economic significance and will continue to rise as both regional and global powers. If a consensus cannot be reached on the boundary issues, perhaps the two can come to an agreement on the dynamics of the frontier that Aksai Chin has proven to be.

In any case, India continues to assert that the region up to the Kun Lun Mountain 'has been and will always remain an integral part of India'. The 2019 move of establishing the UTs of J&K and Ladakh was as much a move against the Kashmir militancy issue as it was against the Chinese cartographic aggression. India's unsaid policy of not developing disputed and disturbed border regions in order to avoid putting them at further risk seems to be fading away. In the past decade, India has begun infrastructure development along the Western sector and at a speed that shows urgency. This has the Chinese side worried about the possible loss of their strategic advantage in that region. The Galwan clash was likely a direct response to these factors and also India changing her domestic law with regard to Jammu & Kashmir and the Union Territory of Ladakh. Perhaps that is a signal that China is beginning to realise that India will refuse to be pushed back, without establishing peace along the border, without ceding any territory.

Robert Kaplan said, "In geopolitics, the past never dies, and there is no modern world". This holds especially true in the case of India and China. The two nations are competitors and rivals in more than just one field in international relations today. India and China are volleying today for influential positions in both continental and maritime Asia (Rao, 2021, p. 459). While the relations have certainly seen improvement since the 1962 'War that Wasn't' (Verma, 2016), the ties are fragile and the fragility is exposed time and again by regional rivalries, past conflicts, hostile public opinion, and political tensions. There is unending criticism when it comes to the methods that India used to deal with the China question from 1949

to 1962. There is also the question of whether India could have acted any differently given the relationship between the leadership at the time.

The Aksai Chin crisis was born when attention was not paid to this 'grey area', while the Tibetan border near Tawang was being secured. From 1949, till present, if the events are studied, some might say it was not a completely inevitable crisis. AG Noorani (2011) calls the diplomatic consequences of the deepening rift between India and China 'incalculable', specifically with regard to India's relations with its other neighbours, particularly Pakistan. China's favourite argument of 'historical claim' was put into play even in Eastern Ladakh. The convenience of these historical claims has always been the reference to an era where the sanctity of the boundaries was not as much as the present times.

Perhaps the Aksai Chin crisis was evitable if India's leadership had taken up firm positions and stationed a physical military presence at the disputed frontier. But it still remains that time and again Chinese aggression at the western sector has pushed back at the Indian forces. While the diplomatic talks, negotiations and dialogues continue to take place, there is no telling how effective they will be in long term. After all, they have been ongoing since the first time this dispute came to light.

Eastern Ladakh's topography and strategic significance are manifold, however, today it has also become a political symbol that directly affects India's national interest. Therefore, India will stick to its statement that Aksai Chin has been and will always be, an integral part of the Indian territory. The infrastructural conflict that the two states are constantly engaged in will only continue to grow with time as India is a rising power that is trying to expand its influence in South Asia. This conflict also continues to harbour instability in the region as the border dispute has now run for decades. Although the region is uninhabitable, China continues to assert its strategic importance – as a connect between Tibet and Xinjiang. The construction of the G219 highway also stood as the trigger for the 1962 war.

This region of Eastern Ladakh is comparatively more difficult to access from the Indian side than from China. In 1962, and with Pt. Nehru's Forward Policy, the glaring flaws and loopholes – from inadequate number of soldiers to lack of crucial logistic and supply lines – caused the region to fall to Chinese aggression. There is need of massive infrastructure overhaul, and the use of the peculiar geography that Eastern Ladakh offers. The crucial Karakoram (G219/Xinjiang-Tibet) Highway is how the Chinese established their dominance in the region, and to re-establish Aksai Chin as the buffer it was initially seen as for India, a possible military haul may be required.

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ⁱ A landlocked lake

ⁱⁱ 'A Note on the Historical Background of the Himalayan Frontier of India'

ⁱⁱⁱ Ambassador Parthasarathy: Message to the Prime Minister, September 9, 1959

^{iv} PP14 stands for Patrol Point 14 where Indian troops tore down a Chinese observation post following aggression by the Chinese troops in June, 2020. The Chinese rebuilt the post soon after.