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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Srdjan Uljevic (2020). *India's Relations with China after Galwan*. (Policy Brief / OSCE Academy in Bishkek, 65). Bishkek: OSCE Academy in Bishkek. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-78426-6>

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POLICY BRIEF

#65, NOVEMBER 2020



India's Relations with China after Galwan

by Srdjan Uljevic

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The border incident that took place in the Galwan Valley on June 15th and resulted in casualties – the first in over forty-five years – has severely deteriorated relations between India and China and caught analysts and policymakers off guard. The incident marks the end of the diplomatic phase commonly referred to as “the Wuhan spirit” or “the Wuhan consensus.” Initiated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2017 and consisting of a series of summits with the Chinese President Xi Jinping, the purpose of “the Wuhan spirit” was to reset relations between the two countries, stabilize the border areas, and focus on issues of common interest. It is unclear what China was attempting to achieve by unnecessarily antagonizing a neighbor large enough to balance against its rise, but that was also willing to build a stable and pragmatic relationship at a time when Beijing is facing an increasingly challenging international environment. Going forward, India will most likely continue to invest in issue based coalitions by strengthening security and defense cooperation with a number of like-minded middle powers.

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The OSCE Academy's Policy Briefs became possible with financial support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs via the Academy's Cooperation with the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

Introduction

The border clash that took place on June 15 in the Galwan Valley (situated high in the Himalayan territory of Ladakh) has significantly impacted relations between New Delhi and Beijing and is likely to have a long lasting negative effect. The grizzly details of the brawl in which Chinese soldiers apparently used nailed-studded rods¹ and the fact that the skirmish resulted in deaths – the first in forty five years between the two sides – has caught analysts and policymakers off guard. The incident has wiped away years of goodwill efforts spearheaded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and commonly referred to as “the Wuhan spirit” or “the Wuhan consensus.” As a result, New Delhi is not only reassessing its relationship with Beijing but has once again started debating the usefulness of its well-known reluctance to join alliances² – a cornerstone of India’s foreign policy that dates back to the early days of the Cold War.³ However unlikely is for New Delhi to join the US alliance system,⁴ it can be argued that China already perceives India as belonging to the “US camp,” albeit without the protection

granted to a member of an alliance. This conclusion is based on the premeditated nature of the Galwan attack⁵ and its ferocity – implying approval from the top – as well as the diplomatic phase of the bilateral relationship when the incident occurred – suggesting a message to the Indian leadership. Therefore, when it comes to India’s relations with China, post-Galwan, the challenge ahead is to utilize the most of the recent and ongoing structural changes in the international system while remaining within the contours of New Delhi’s policy of strategic autonomy.

Border Dispute and the Wuhan Spirit

To understand the full effect of the Galwan skirmish on China-India relations, the incident needs to be placed within two appropriate contexts: first being the long running border dispute – one of the several unresolved bilateral problems that have plagued the two countries for decades – and second being an important diplomatic phase of the bilateral relationship known as “the Wuhan spirit.”

The Line of Actual Control (LAC) – a *de facto* border between the two countries – has over the years witnessed many skirmishes. The most severe being the 1962 conflict commonly referred to as “war” due to its intensity, despite the fact that neither side had declared war.⁶ In spite of diplomatic efforts⁷ aimed at

¹ The BBC, “Galwan Valley: Image appears to show nail-studded rods used in India-China brawl,” *The BBC*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53089037>.

² For example: Suhasini Haidar, “China’s aggression pushing India closer to U.S. but alliance unlikely at present: Experts,” *The Hindu*, August 9, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/chinas-aggression-pushing-india-closer-to-us-but-alliance-unlikely-at-present-experts/article32310027.ece>; Gideon Rachman, “India picks a side in the new cold war,” *Financial Times*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/d74d9bda-6822-4f85-9d48-a285a9effe07>; Arzan Tarapore, “India does not need a Cold War alliance,” July 27, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/07/27/india-does-not-need-a-cold-war-alliance/>

³ Harsh V. Pant, *Indian Foreign Policy: An Overview* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 4.

⁴ *The Hindu*, “India will never be a part of an alliance system, says External Affairs Minister Jaishankar,” *The Hindu*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-has-never-been-part-of-an-alliance-and-will-never-be-jaishankar/article32142128.ece>.

⁵ Geeta Mohan, “China planned Galwan attack: EAM Jaishankar warns Chinese counterpart of serious impact on bilateral ties,” *India Today*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/galwan-clash-was-premeditated-attack-by-china-eam-jaishankar-warns-china-of-serious-impact-on-bilateral-ties-1690007-2020-06-17>.

⁶ Shivshankar Menon, *Choices: Inside The Making of Indian Foreign Policy*, (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 12.

⁷ Between 1993 and 2005 a number of agreements were negotiated starting with The Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, signed in September 1993.

stabilizing the situation and preventing future border incidents, they still happen. The Doklam standoff, a tense two-months period in the summer of 2017 during which Chinese and Indian military forces faced each other near the tri-junction border area with Bhutan, was one such incident. Facing the most serious border and diplomatic incident in years, the two leaders engaged in a series of personal meetings and summits that, when taken together with the mantra of the period, mark “the Wuhan spirit.”

The very first meeting was in Astana (Kazakhstan), held on the margins of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit on June 9th of 2017. Despite taking place only days prior to the beginning of the standoff, the meeting is nonetheless very important as it set the key principle, or mantra, of the bilateral engagement, namely “*that differences should not become disputes and that in fact if they were handled well, they may even be opportunities.*”⁸ The standoff in Doklam was settled without bloodshed days before the second meeting,⁹ this time on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Xiamen (China) and less than three months after Astana. Two high level informal summits followed: first in Wuhan (China) in April of 2018,¹⁰ and then in Mamallapuram (India) in October of 2019.¹¹

What was India hoping to achieve with the informal summit diplomacy characterizing “the Wuhan spirit”? Two goals: comprehensive strategic accommodation and commitment to stabilize the border areas by adhering to the border agreements.

Prime Minister Modi attempted to reset India's relations with China by building personal rapport with President Xi Jinping.¹² The goal was to keep the relationship stable and engage Beijing in areas of shared interests, such as economic cooperation, thus allowing India to prioritize socio-economic development instead of “*divert[ing] expenditure from development to defense.*”¹³ Interestingly, it can be argued that this was the second time in four years that Prime Minister Modi personally reached out to President Xi Jinping in an attempt for India and China to agree on a long-term, strategic accommodation¹⁴ - one based on economic interdependence and shared belief that both countries are civilizational states with ancient and distinct histories, destined to play dominant roles in Asian and international affairs.

The second goal was to stabilize the border areas by implementing the border agreements. To that end, the press releases of the informal summits in Wuhan and Mamallapuram

⁸ Elizabeth Roche and Shrey Jain, “Modi-Xi meeting in Astana: PM calls for respecting each other's core concerns,” *LiveMint*, June 9, 2017, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/Ii1uWldxHRg32p8sdsHnTK/ModiXi-meeting-in-Astana-PM-calls-for-respecting-each-othe.html>.

⁹ Ankit Panda, “Disengagement at Doklam: Why and How Did the India-China Standoff End?,” *The Diplomat*, August 29, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/disengagement-at-doklam-why-and-how-did-the-india-china-standoff-end/>.

¹⁰ Ministry of External Affairs, “India-China Informal Summit at Wuhan,” *Ministry of External Affairs*, April 28, 2018, https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29853/IndiaChina_Informal_Summit_at_Wuhan.

¹¹ Ministry of External Affairs, “2nd India-China Informal Summit,” *Ministry of External Affairs*, October 12, 2019, <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/31938/2nd+indiachina+informal+summit>.

¹² Constantino Xavier, “Modi's Middle Way,” *The Asian Forum*, August 28, 2019, <http://www.theasianforum.org/modis-middle-way/>.

¹³ Tanvi Madan, “Managing China: Competitive engagement, with Indian characteristics,” *The Brookings Institution*, February 1, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/managing-china-competitive-engagement-with-indian-characteristics/>.

¹⁴ The first attempt took place at the very first summit of the two leaders held in September of 2014 in Gujarat, Prime Minister Modi's home state. The summit was organized only few months into PM Modi's tenure but was unfortunately tainted by the PLA's incursion in Chumar (eastern Ladakh): Jason Burke and Tania Branigan, “India-China border standoff highlights tensions before Xi visit,” *The Guardian*, September 16, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/16/india-china-border-standoff-xi-visit>.

call for both sides to ensure “*peace and tranquility in the border areas*”¹⁵ by “*earnestly implement[ing] various confidence building measures agreed upon between the two sides, including the principle of mutual and equal security, and strengthen existing institutional arrangements and information sharing mechanisms to prevent incidents in border regions.*”¹⁶

In the end, Prime Minister Modi’s overtures were either misinterpreted or simply disregarded by the Chinese leadership. The latter, if proven correct, could only be characterized as a serious miscalculation on Beijing’s part.

What Does India’s Evolving Foreign Policy Hold for China?

As previously noted, the policy of non-alignment has been the guiding principle of India’s engagement with the world ever since the country gained independence. During the Cold War, New Delhi chose not to align with either of the two blocks in order to have more choices and by doing so enhanced its strategic autonomy.¹⁷ However, the international system has witnessed profound changes in the last decade with a resurging Russia and a bellicose China. Both countries share strong anti-Western sentiment and are actively undermining institutions and norms of the liberal international order. It is only to be expected that India’s foreign policy adapt to this new international environment.

Since the end of the Cold War, India’s foreign

policy has evolved in at least two ways: the advent of strategic partnerships with likeminded countries, and a more pragmatic re-interpretation of the meaning of strategic autonomy. Predating both, however, was an important ideational shift that came with the government of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). BJP was less supportive of the non-alignment policy among other reasons because the policy was perceived as an ideological product of the Indian National Congress and their worldview.¹⁸ Strategic partnerships marked a new chapter for India since they were considered anathema during the Cold War era.¹⁹ They allow New Delhi to deepen bilateral relations with selected countries in areas such as security and defense. While India might never join a formal military alliance, the concept of strategic autonomy is today interpreted as “issue or interest based coalitions,” thus giving New Delhi enough breath to boost external balancing and serve as a deterrence to China.²⁰

¹⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, “2nd India-China Informal Summit.”

¹⁶ Ministry of External Affairs, “India-China Informal Summit at Wuhan.”

¹⁷ Foundation for India Studies, *India – China Competition in South Asia: The Past, Present, and Future* (Dr. Constantino Xavier), accessed August 23, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2k-YRdFsSg&feature=youtu.be>.

¹⁸ Nepal Institute for International Cooperation and Engagement, “*Changing Contours of Indian Foreign Policy - Prof Harsh V Pant*,” accessed August 11, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PqCWRYL_AY.

¹⁹ Nepal Institute for International Cooperation and Engagement, “*Changing Contours of Indian Foreign Policy - Prof Harsh V Pant*.”

²⁰ According to Tanvi Madan, senior fellow at the Brookings Institutions, strategic autonomy is best understood as “issue or interest based coalitions”; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Emerging Global Issues: The China-India Boundary Crisis & Its Implications*, (Washington DC, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020), 8, accessed September 12, 2020, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-09/Madan_Testimony.pdf.

Conclusions

It is difficult to understand what China has gained by unnecessarily antagonizing a neighbor large enough to balance against its rise, but that was also willing to build a stable and pragmatic relationship at a time when Beijing is facing an increasingly challenging international environment. After the Galwan incident, India seems to be determined to stretch the meaning of strategic autonomy to its limits. Restraint has been replaced by readiness to deepen security and defense cooperation both bilaterally - with a range of middle powers concerned with China's recent aggressive posturing, including Japan, Australia and France - and multilaterally by reinvigorating the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD).²¹ At the same time, the strategic partnership with the US was lifted to a new level after India signed the last of the four military foundational pacts.²² While all this should give Beijing pause, the door is still open for strategic accommodation.²³

²¹ The Hindu, "Quad should ensure Freedom of Navigation in Indian Ocean: Gen. Rawat," *The Hindu*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/quad-should-ensure-freedom-of-navigation-in-indian-ocean-gen-rawat/article32517321.ece>.

²² Ajai Shukla, "US-India deal: Conclusion of BECA to open doors for high-tech arms transfers," *Business Standard*, October 27, 2020, https://www.business-standard.com/article/defence/us-india-deal-conclusion-of-beca-to-open-doors-for-high-tech-arms-120102700074_1.html.

²³ Observer Research Foundation, *Book Discussion | The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* by Dr. S. Jaishankar, accessed September 3, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPARyx1Xj90>.

Recommendations

- First, Beijing and New Delhi should try to reach strategic accommodation. Despite the current state of affairs between the two countries it is in the interest of both sides to negotiate a grand bargain – an accommodation that would, on one hand, allow India to focus on economic development, while on the other hand, reassure China that India will not take sides in the emerging strategic competition between Beijing and Washington.
- Second, India should further open and liberalize its economy in order to increase its relative power vis-à-vis China. If relations with China cannot be rescued and strategic accommodation is improbable, then New Delhi will have no choice but to strengthen both internal and external balancing. This will require a strong and vibrant economy. India seems poised to reap benefits from the reorganization of supply chains following the ongoing efforts to decouple American and Chinese economies. However, recently announced plans for self-reliance (atmanirbharta) harkens back to the era of the License Raj, which if true, is discouraging.
- Third, India should continue to deepen security and defense cooperation, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Further institutionalization of the QUAD would send a clear signal to Beijing that New Delhi is pressing ahead with the issue-based coalitions.