



CHINA-INDIA BORDER STANDOFF: AN OVERVIEW

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



China and India are once again engaged in a military standoff over the border dispute in the region of Ladakh. The scuffle between the military personnel of both countries on May 5, 2020 along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is not new. The recent standoff came at the heels of Indian declaration of Ladakh and Sikkim as its Union Territory in October 2019.¹

Border tensions between China and India are not a new phenomenon. Previously in 2017, the two states engaged in a conflict in Doklam, when Indian soldiers in Sikkim took Chinese border guards completely by surprise when they crossed into Bhutan and physically blocked Chinese road construction crew from extending a track towards LAC.² All crises in the past one decade were diffused successfully by the intervention of higher political leadership on both sides.

The Recent Stand-off

On May 5, 2020, Chinese military started taking positions on LAC along four main locations, three along the Galwan River and one along the Pangong Lake. The strategic significance of these two points is different for both China and India.

¹ "The Big Changes In Jammu and Kashmir Ladakh From Today", *NDTV*, October 31, 2019
<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/jammu-and-kashmir-ladakh-to-become-union-territories-from-october-31-what-it-means-2124744>

² Josy Joseph, "What is the Doklam issue all about?", *The Hindu*, January 27, 2018

Pangong Lake

Map 1



Source: Jeff M. Smith Research Fellow, South Asia, The Heritage Foundation

The mountains in the Pangong Lake which the army calls fingers are numbered as fingers 1 to 8. On May 12, 2020, Chinese soldiers started moving into the Pangong Lake area between finger 8 and finger 4.

According to the Indian claim, the LAC has boundaries with finger 8, but on ground Indian military physically controls area only up to finger 4.³

Similarly Chinese side claim that the LAC passes through finger 2 but their military post was present at finger 8.⁴

Chinese PLA's patrol teams normally patrols behind finger 8, but because of narrow passage, finger 6 is the only point from where Chinese military vehicles can turn around when they are on the move. Since the Chinese forces are able to spend a considerable amount of time on the Indian side of the claim line before they are detected, the Indian army decided to build a new observation point at finger 8 that would give Indian soldiers a bird's eye view of the area and spot Chinese patrols as soon as they enter the area.

³ Devirupa Mitra, "Ahead of Border Talks With China, India Still Unclear of Reason Behind Troops Stand-Off", *The WIRE*, June 5, 2020

⁴ Ibid.

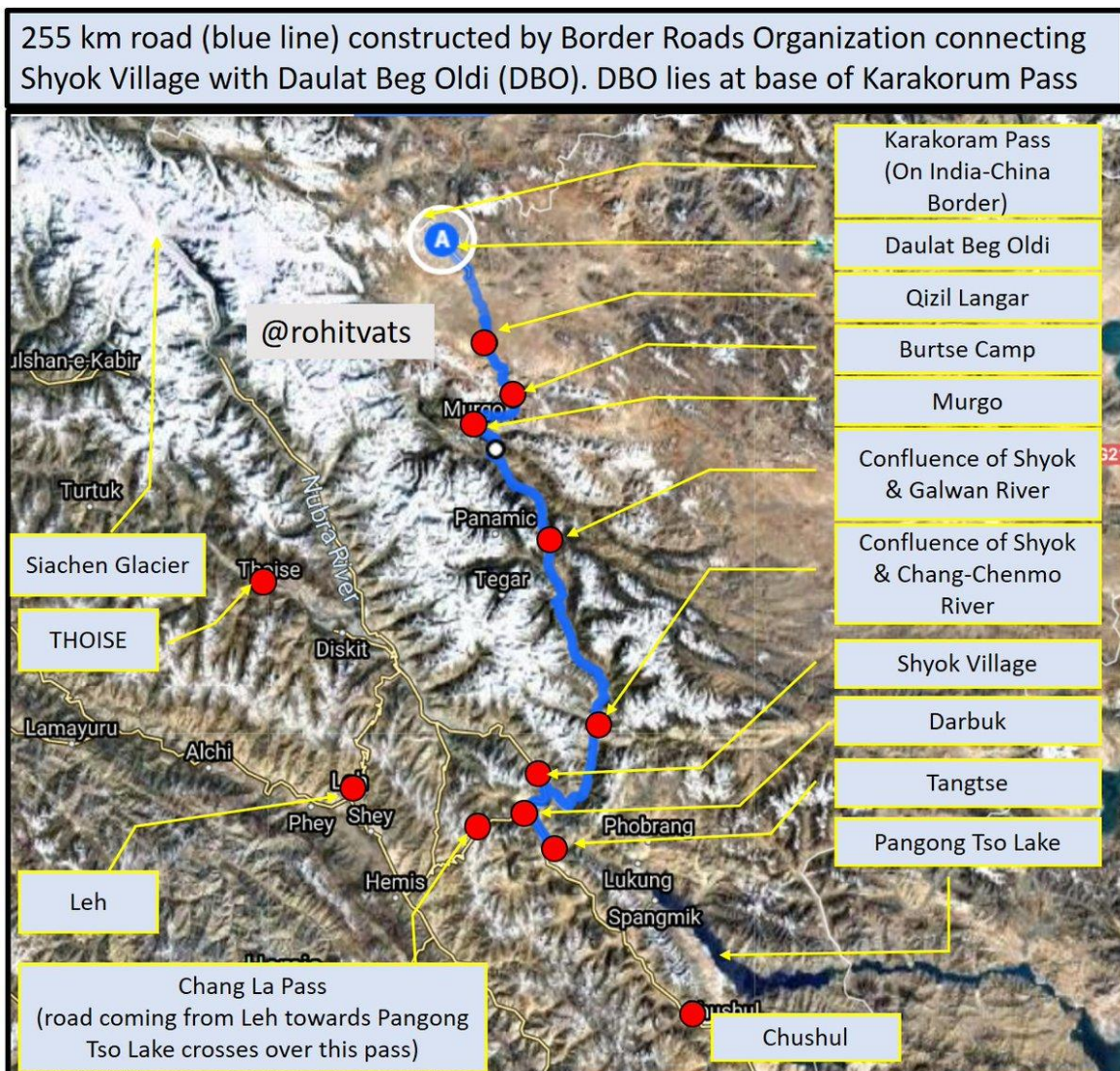
In May 2020, a large number of Chinese border patrol reached the area near finger 6 which is a strategic point for Chinese soldiers. The Chinese have now stopped the Indian soldiers moving beyond Finger 2.⁵ This is an eyeball-to-eyeball situation which is still developing. So the quest in this area is of strategic advantage over one another by capturing the fingers. The issue in Pangong Lake area has a military significance only. The party having strong military control will be in a better strategic position in the area.

Issues in the Galwan Valley

It is pertinent to note here that the issue in the Galwan Valley has both military as well as political strings attached to it. Purportedly, the Indian Border Road Organization (BRO) has undertaken the task of constructing border roads over the past few years to improve India's military access to remote points on the LAC. The construction of the 255-km Darbuk-Shyok-Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO) road, which provides access to the Depsang area and Galwan Valley while ending near the Karakoram Pass, has raised concerns for China and the safety of its BRI-CPEC route given the Indian opposition to the project. (*See Map 2*)

⁵ Ibid.

Map 2



Source: www.globalvillagespace.com/Indo-Chinastandoffinladdakh

According to Indian media reports, China has deployed around 5000 troops on the western ridge of Galwan Valley to counter Indian aims of connectivity with the Karakoram Pass into Xinjiang through extension of DSDBO road.⁶ It is pertinent to note here that there is a clear difference in Karakoram Highway and Karakoram Pass which can be understood on the map only. (See Map 3)

The DSDBO has an air landing strip used by Indian Air Force for C-130 landings. This landing strip is important for the Indian Army for air deployment of equipment and troops in the area. Also, the DSDBO Road itself is strategically important for the Indian Army deployments and reinforcements in

⁶ "Exclusive: Chinese troops wanted to enter deeper into the Indian side, but India thwarted it", *India Today*, 30 May 30, 2020.

the event of a conflict. Any Chinese advancement in the area will be a threat to the Indian control of the Siachen Glacier.

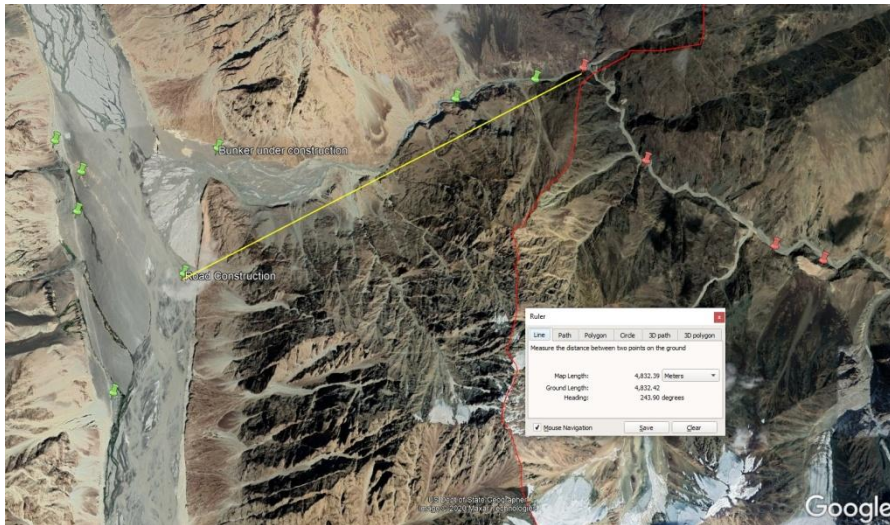
Map 3



Source: Google Maps. Two maps have been combined by the author for understanding

India's political aims in this region cannot be ignored as every military strategy is designed to get political advantages. Indian aim was to connect DSDBO road with Karakoram Pass into China by building a bridge on Shyok River and then extending a patch to the Karakoram Pass in the Valley as seen in Map 4. This patch of 5 km is considered to be the strategic lifeline of India as with this connectivity, India with the help of US, will be able to politically pressurize China in the Xinjiang region which is now becoming the hub of BRI-CPEC activity. Following its recent unconstitutional steps in Indian Occupied Kashmir, India seems to be taking steps to buttress its advantage in the disputed region. Former Indian army chief, V.K. Singh has said that the entire Kashmir belongs to India. Referring to part of Kashmir in Pakistan, he said that it is a part of India and has asserted that it will come to India on its own.⁷

⁷ "Plan ready, army will take action when time comes: VK Singh on Gilgit-Baltistan", *India Today*, May 9, 2020.

Map 4

Source: Google Earth

The recent Indian developments in this region are an effort to have a direct access to Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan after claiming the territory of Aksai Chin.

It is in the best interest of both China and Pakistan, that India should be firmly dissuaded from considering to enter in Gilgit-Baltistan to fulfill its long-stated goal of unifying Kashmir in pursuit of a unanimous parliamentary resolution passed in 1994. China has also been vocal about retaining Aksai Chin which is the essential link between Tibet and Xinjiang. China's national highway 219 passes through this passage. Aksai Chin is therefore central to China's territorial unity and the one-China principle. Whether it is line of control or line of actual control, the Indian aims and its territorial disputes with its neighbors hold the potential for disturbing the strategic balance in the region.

In the background of rising aggression by India, there have been concerns of Indian false flag operations. In fact, India has once again threatened air strikes inside Pakistan, like the one in Balakot in February 2019, to materialize its military plans in the region.⁸ Such actions would be nothing but disastrous.

<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/agenda-aajtak-minister-vk-singh-former-army-chief-pakistan-gilgit-baltistan-1676190-2020-05-09>

⁸ Official Twitter account of Press Trust of India, https://twitter.com/PTI_News/status/1269960181061804032