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THE CURRENT: What's fueling the India-China border skirmish?

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(MUSIC)

PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

On Tuesday, Indian and Chinese forces clashed along a disputed border in northwestern India high in the Himalayas, resulting in the deaths of some 20 Indian soldiers. While the foreign ministers of both countries have spoken in an effort to de-escalate the situation, this is the deadliest confrontation between the two nuclear-armed powers in over 40 years.

With us today to discuss what's happening is Tanvi Madan, a senior fellow and director of the India Project here at Brookings and author of, "Fateful Triangle: How China Shaped US-India Relations During the Cold War." Tanvi, thanks for talking to us today.

MADAN: Thanks for having me on the podcast.

PITA: So what do we know about exactly what happened on Tuesday?

MADAN: So what we know on what happened on June 15 is that at least 20 soldiers were killed in a skirmish with Chinese troops. We do not know the Chinese casualty numbers - they do not tend to officially release this sometimes for decades, for various reasons - but I want to take you a little bit back to kind of set the ground for how we got to this point.

Since early May at least, Indian and Chinese troops have been facing off in multiple points of their boundary, which is about 35 kilometers long; at least that's, you know, the Indian view of it. They have different sectors: there's a western sector near Kashmir, there is a middle sector to the west of Nepal and an eastern sector, which includes Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh to the east. And so, this is taking place in the [western] sector around the region called Ladakh. And there has been there have been these faceoffs at multiple points in this western sector over the last few weeks. One thing to keep in mind this is an un-demarcated boundary between the two countries. What's called a "line of actual control" serves is kind of the de facto boundary, and it separates the two countries' troops. There's an understanding that both sides patrol the areas they both claim around this line of actual control, but they do not establish a permanent presence and their agreement is that they're not supposed to unilaterally change the status quo.

And these faceoffs that I mentioned have been taking place after reports came out that what sparked these were the PLA, the People's Liberation Army, changing the status quo at multiple points, either by setting up tents or bunkers, or by hindering Indian patrols. They've also traditionally patrolled these areas. And then the Indian military moving forward to resist and then through dialogue to get them

to roll back some of these steps that the PLA had taken. This has been going on and what we saw on June 6 was that the two sides' senior military leaders met and agreed to a process of disengagement and de-escalation. During the course of this process, which was ongoing, we saw this incident occur on June 15.

Details are still a bit hazy. What we do know is that after these agreements, India dismantled some tents that it says were set up by the Chinese on its side of the line of actual control. And subsequent to that Chinese troops came in large numbers, in the hundreds, and set upon these Indian troops. In the resulting skirmish – this is taking place, mind you, in very treacherous terrain, at very high altitude – that there was a number of casualties. One reason the casualty count is so high – there was no shooting at the border, it involved kind of sticks and stones – one of the reason you're seeing such a high casualty count is likely to be because of the terrain and people falling. The troops falling off of being pushed off the cliffs into the valley below. So that's just something to keep in mind as we think about why the casualty count has been so high.

Just one thing to point out: why is this significant? Unlike the India-Pakistan boundary where you do see skirmishes quite regularly, where you do see fatalities and casualties, on the India-China boundary there has not been a fatality since 1975. And this is the most serious incident of this sort since 1967, when the two sides skirmished and India admitted to casualty figures of over 200. So this is a watershed moment for India and China. They have often said that they have had no fatalities at their border for over four decades. That is now that is now a threshold that they have crossed.

PITA: Thank you. Maybe you can give us a little more background as to why this area's in dispute. Is the border not demarcated just because of the territorial difficulties that you were speaking about or what has been the relationship between the two countries over this area?

MADAN: So there are parts of this area that both sides have contested, and this has been ongoing since at least the 1950s, where in fact it was it was the spark for what was the 1962 India-China, war, which is the last time these two countries fought a major war. Since the 50s, this area has been in dispute. Both sides claim certain areas, but what was an understanding after the 1962 war was that they would maintain this de facto line. One of the things that is often become a source of confusion is there is this line of actual control, but that that does not coincide in all places with what China claims. And at various points there has been a sense that China has changed its claims or kind of extended its claim. So, one question is, have they done so this time? The Chinese on their part are saying that the Indians crossed the line of actual control, and we are still trying to figure out which line do they mean.

There has been some effort, short of resolving the overall boundary dispute, which stretches across all their sectors - the western, middle, and eastern sector of the boundaries - there has been an effort that, short of resolving it, the Indians have proposed at least demarcating this boundary. Because while we have seen in the last, you know, since 2012, 2013 about four such incidents, one of which involve Bhutan as well, but at least between India and China we've seen three incidents. And so, this is a third incident that's risen to this level of seriousness. But even between those times you see because this boundary is un-demarcated, you see patrols often kind of transgressing into each other's kind of areas and facing off against each other, bumping up against each other. So, the Indian government had proposed that they at the very least demarcate the boundary so it stops that confusion without prejudice to their larger claims. Till about 2003, the Chinese have shown some willingness to think about a demarcation process, but since that point they have shown in no interest in doing so. And in fact, have refused Indian requests to do so.

PITA: What are some of the other dynamics at play here between the two countries? Should this be understood, maybe, as China sort of testing out what sort of provocations they can get away with while everyone is occupied with coronavirus or is this may be related to India's tightening of controls over Kashmir, which is neighboring region right up there? What else is going on?

MADAN: So, one of the things about this whole set of face-offs, this crisis more broadly, is there is a lot we don't know, including what is going on in the ground. The details of that, but also we don't know what the Chinese motivations particularly are. But I can lay out for you some of the range of causes and motivations that people have laid out. Now I should say that it doesn't mean that there's one single cause. You can see for example a proximate cause and then a larger context that has fed into it. I say if you think about it in terms of kind of levels, there is a set of potential motivations that have been laid out at the bilateral level, that that the initial Chinese steps were taken to change the status quo because - one set of motivations that has been that speculated about - is that they want to do in this area what they have done in the South China Sea, which is incrementally push their claims, change facts on the ground, and then either claim a fait accompli, which then the other side will accept or that at the negotiating table they will still negotiate gains. That is, they move two steps forward at the negotiating table, they say will move one step back, but they have made that what that incremental gain. That they intend to essentially establish a presence and take over all the territory that they have claimed historically in this area. That's one kind of bilateral.

Another has been that Indian moves have sparked this Chinese action. One is that the Chinese are concerned about Indian infrastructure building, particularly a north-south road, a strategic road that India has built that gives India the ability to supply its troops and, you know, kind of enhance its troop presence near the line of actual control. While this infrastructure is on India's side of the line of actual control, China, which has for years built up the infrastructure on its side of the boundary, you have seen the Chinese say that India is now changing the status quo. The Indians say, look, you built up all your infrastructure on your side and we're just playing catch-up and it is on our side of the line of actual control and an area that's not disputed. But regardless, this could be that the Chinese have taken an opportunity to say, look, we have a window of opportunity now to either deter or coerce India into kind of stopping this construction. This is unlikely to happen, I would say.

A third option on the bilateral side that people have talked about is that India in August, when it diluted what's called article 370 in the Constitution that gave what was then called the state of Jammu and Kashmir a certain amount of autonomy, it split that state into two union territories. Union territories means, they have been administered now for the last few months by the center. One [union territory] of Jammu and Kashmir and then separating out Ladakh, which is the area that borders China and part of which China claims. In the course of doing that, India is not just now administrating this union territory, but in the maps that they put out, it actually showed its larger claims, which is to the whole Aksai Chin plateau, a significant part of which China holds now. And so, some believe that that Indian step, though it doesn't actually change the ground realities in any way, that that is what sparked the Chinese move.

Very quickly, there are a few other kind of bilateral steps that people have speculated about that China's upset [about], either with India's putting in restrictions so that Chinese investments will require greater scrutiny, or India's stance at the WHO, or India's deepening relationship with the U.S., but for various reasons, these don't quite explain this particular incident, at least in the proximate. There is a regional kind of argument that people have made that does provide some context, which was the this very much, this Chinese step changed the status quo of this boundary and kind of pushed the boundary, so to speak, fits with a larger pattern of what we've seen over the last few weeks, which is China pushing

forward on a number of fronts, whether that's Taiwan and Hong Kong, whether that's pushing Australia, whether that's in the South China Sea, whether towards Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and then this is just another step in that.

But then the question becomes, why are they pushing out now and this is where covid comes in. And there's a debate between those who are saying China's showing greater assertiveness in various places out of weakness or add a sense of insecurity. That Xi Jinping does not want to give his detractors at home or abroad to say that, look, this is a moment of weakness. They haven't performed well with covid and so he needs to show strength. There's another school of thought that says no, Xi Jinping is doing this because he sees a window of opportunity while a number of other countries are on the back foot due to covid and that China had kind of been ahead of the curve, so to speak, in recovering. That while the major powers are distracted, while India's dealing with these issues or, a lot of other countries are, to take seeing this is a window of opportunity to move forward.

So, these are kind of the broader [reasons]. Some people, though this doesn't really fit, [say] this is because of a global reason. This is part of this Chinese step against India as part of the kind of broader U.S.-China competition, though, that seems a little less well-argued at this point.

PITA: And lastly, you've characterized the Modi government's policies towards China as one of competitive engagement, which I sort of take mean they're rivals, but everyone is still on good company manners with each other. Is the severity of this incident likely to change how India and China approach each other relate to each other going forward?

MADAN: Yes, at first glance, yes. The question is how. When I talked about India's approach to China being competitive engagement, what I essentially meant was that while people will often focus over the last few years – there've been a number of Modi-Xi summits, for example -- while there are elements of engagement in the relationship for various reasons, that this is a largely competitive relationship as far as India is concerned. I wrote about this in my paper for the Global China series that the Brookings Foreign Policy program has put out, laying out the various elements of it. But what I think in that part of this competitive engagement process has meant that India has managed its China relationship in three different ways:

One, through engaging China to try to kind of keep it on board, on side, and take advantage of the economic ties to its own economic prosperity. But also, there has been a combination of internal balancing, that is India building its own military and economic capabilities, its infrastructure, etc., upgrading those. And third, true external balancing, which is building a network of partnerships that both help balance China -- and this is with countries like the U.S., with Australia, Japan, with France, with Vietnam, even with Russia, to some extent, which is a traditional Indian partner. So, to balance China, but these partnerships also help India with internal balancing by helping build up its capabilities through the provision of military equipment, technology, capital, etc.

What I think this crisis, we have to wait and see the extent of it. It is going to put a deep strain on that first leg, which is engagement with China. And it will depend on how this plays out over the next few weeks. Do they now go back to that de-escalation process? Does China move back? Does it restore status quo ante, which is what the Indians want? Or do they refuse to do that? If they refuse to do that, then the question becomes, does India need to actually, will it take military steps to push them back? We don't know that yet, but regardless I think you will see, not only in terms of a government-to-government level, that will put strain on that relationship. The Indian foreign minister yesterday or the day before said

that he told, in his conversation with state counselor and foreign minister Wang Yi, that he told him that these developments will have serious repercussions for the broader China-India relationship, but also that anti-China sentiment has grown considerably over the last few months, both because of covid and now because of this face-off and now the killing of Indian soldiers and it will put strain on that engagement leg. I think it should, whether it will mean India will have to make a decision to make certain trade-offs in terms of things like defense and development spending, but it will mean that it will likely accelerate both the internal balancing and the external balancing that way.

I'll just say one word about the external balancing because it has implications for the U.S. You are already hearing voices say that India should not now stop hesitating to get even closer to the U.S. That China has shown that it does not respect the agreements that are in place, and so far, India has been limiting to some extent its deepening cooperation with the U.S. so as not to provoke China, but China's doing these things anyway. So, at this point India should kind of drop the hesitation and get even closer. There are going to have a few, it's in the minority, voices who say no, in fact, that will provoke China even more. But there's also other reasons, including Indian uncertainty about where administrations in the U.S. or presidents stand on China, which is why India will not put all its eggs in the U.S. basket. But India, as we've seen over, especially, the last few years, has come to the conclusion that a better relationship with the U.S., a deeper defense, security, diplomatic relationship, has actually helped it balance China and build its own capabilities. So, unless we see a hesitation for other broader reasons, I do think you will see strain on the engagement side and a kind of doubling down on the internal, external balancing parts of India's managing its China relationship. The extent of that, the urgency of that, I think we shall have to wait and see.

PITA: All right, Tanvi. Thanks very much for talking with us today and explaining what's going on.

MADAN: Thanks, Adrianna