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Security Nexus Perspectives

## CHINA'S SALAMI SLICING TACTICS AND THE LATEST INDIA-CHINA BORDER STANDOFF

By Dr. Srini Sitaraman \*

Another summer and another standoff between India and China is happening at several locations high on the Himalayan mountain ranges. This article explores the reasons behind the annual summer standoff along the highly contested Line of Actual Control (LAC) between China and India.

China has been surreptitiously engaging in [salami-slicing tactics](#) gradually occupying contested territory and [offering a fait accompli](#) to its Indian counterpart, at which point India has to either accept the new territorial status-quo or militarily confront a larger and economically well-resourced country. [People's Republic of China is a territorially revisionist power](#) that is engaged in multiple-territorial conflicts with its Asian neighbors and it is employing salami-slicing tactics in an effort to fulfill [Xi Jinping's China Dream project](#) and take China back to its [glorious days](#).

On May 5-6<sup>th</sup> 2020 [reports started appearing in the Indian media of large-scale Chinese troop presence across the LAC](#), which serves as the de facto border separating India and China occupied Tibet. The Chinese PLA (People's Liberation Army) and the Indian Tibetan Border Force (ITBP) have [frequently clashed at several locations](#) along this highly contested Himalayan border.

The most recent clash was in 2017 in Doklam located at the [tri-junction of India, Bhutan, and Tibet](#). After a tense standoff that lasted for 73 days, troops from both sides withdrew to their previously occupied positions. At the end of the 2017 Doklam standoff, it became clear that the Chinese were constructing access roads and other fortifications unbeknownst to India. Construction of access roads, bunkers, and other fortifications are considered a [violation of the pre-existing agreements](#) with and violation of the spirit of cooperation that China had promised.

This Chinese strategy of building infrastructure in contested territories has been described as a "[salami slicing tactic](#)", which involves making small and [incremental encroachments into India's territory](#) that don't

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## China's salami slicing tactics and the latest India-China border standoff

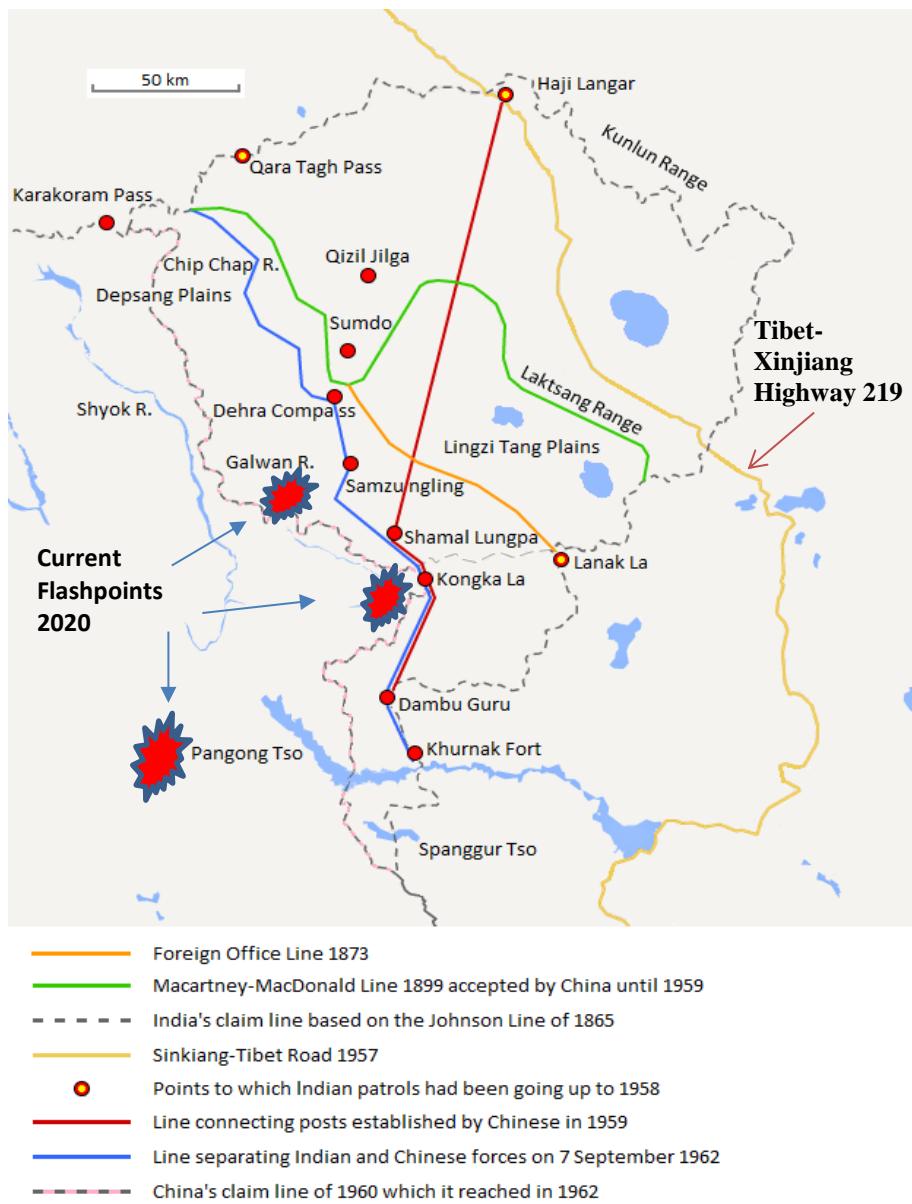
escalate into war but, put together, give Beijing a strategic advantage." Each slice is intended to occupy a piece of the territory that does not belong to China, and upon occupation China will establish effective control over that territory and claim it as its own. A strategy that China has honed in the [South China Sea](#) without significant pushback from the ASEAN countries, with the exception of [Vietnam](#). The only way to force China out of the occupied territory is through combination of physical force and quiet, yet persuasive diplomacy.

The [latest standoff](#) is occurring along three sections—[Galwan Valley](#), [Hot Springs](#), and [Pangong Tso](#) Lake of the Western Sector in the Aksai Chin area, which India claims is a part of Kashmir, but it is occupied by China (Figure 1). In each location, the Indian claim is that [Chinese PLA have encroached on to the Indian side](#) and that they have built fortifications, bunkers, and established permanent military camps. Physical altercation has occurred between Indian and Chinese troops causing [injuries on both sides](#).

The contested Indo-Tibet border is divided into three sections: Western, Middle, and Eastern sector. The latest conflagration is in the Western Sector along the ridges of Aksai Chin region in the Ladakh area of Kashmir has produced intense speculation on Chinese intentions, the extent of encroachment, and whether they are [preparing a bigger attack on Indian positions](#).

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**Figure1:** India-China border flashpoints-Aksai Chin-Ladkah region-2020



Source: Adopted from Wikimedia Commons

Leaked videos and other sources of information on social media suggest that the situation on the ground is highly tense and volatile. No official explanation has been provided either by the Chinese or the Indian government, which is fueling nationalist sentiments in India, and placing heavy pressure on the Indian government to challenge China's unprovoked territorial aggression. So far, Prime Minister Modi has resisted the call for any military action that would cause any casualties because of concern over escalation, especially when the India is dealing with a surge in the number of COVID-19 cases. But Chinese incursions at multiple locations suggest a systematic and coordinated action on the part of the PLA, which would not

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have happened without approval from the highest level from the Ministry of National Defense. The series of incursions along the LAC over the last decade speak to a broader trend in China's strategy of revisionism, expansionism, and hegemony.

Several major high profile summits were held between India and China. Indian Prime Minister Modi visited Wuhan, China on 27-28 April 2018 for an official state visit and the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu in Mahabalipuram hosted the Chinese President Xi Jinping on 11-12 October 2019. Previously, Xi Jinping made an official state visit to Gujarat, India on 17-19 September 2014, the home state of the Indian Prime Minister Modi. But talks, bilateral meetings, understandings, and glamorous summits in exotic locales have not deterred Beijing from its singular pursuit of territorial conquests, whether in South China Sea or in its sustained efforts to erode Indian control along the LAC. At its heart, the People's Republic of China is a territorially revisionist, expansionist, and hegemonic state and it will not stop until it achieves the goals of capturing all of the land and sea areas over which it believes it has "[historic rights](#)." Beijing has particularly turned to an [aggressive maritime posture in the South China Sea](#) and has increased its infrastructure construction along the LAC and increased the [frequency of incursions into areas](#) that are generally accepted as being within Indian control.

Rapid de-escalation requires that the PLA and the ITBF/Indian Army retreat back to their previous positions, which requires diplomatic engagement at the ministerial level. The Indian government seems highly [committed to engaging in talks](#) to defuse the situation and pushback the PLA incursion at several locations along the border. In a statement published in the official English language newspaper—Global Times—said that the "[China-India border is stable and controllable](#)." At the same time, there is no sign that both countries are backing down and instead they are preparing for a long standoff by [bringing heavy equipment and artillery](#) and [increasing their troop strength](#). A long-term solution to this continued conflict is highly unlikely because India-China rivalry encompasses territorial conflict and strategic competition.

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May 2020