

Clubs, Nukes and Climate Change: A Standoff for the Water Tower of Asia

By Dmitry Torba | 09/15/2025

But for the uniforms, the scene was reminiscent of the fights pulled together by medieval battle reenactors. Indian and Chinese soldiers were hitting each other with nail-studded clubs, rocks, and other improvised weapons. Occasionally, a soldier would fall into the ice-cold waters of the Galwan River and not get up. The brutal up close and personal brawl ended the lives of 20-60 men, a lot of whom couldn't get any help.

Galwan Valley lies in the Aksai Chin region of the Himalayan highlands, a territory claimed by India but controlled by China and one of the least hospitable places on the planet. At altitudes of 14,000 to 20,000 feet, it's too high for drones or helicopters to reliably operate. Night temperatures are sub-freezing year-round. Whiteout conditions can happen at any time of the day or night. There are no trees in a bare rocky landscape, and people working at this altitude have to overcome hypothermia, hypoxia, and the risk of psychosis caused by isolation in harsh conditions.

And yet the inhospitable land was the scene of India's and China's clash. China claims that India built a road that challenged Chinese territorial claims; India claims that China erected a watchtower and failed to dismantle it as per the diplomatic agreement. Following the 1996 agreement, guns were prohibited within 2 kilometers of the line of control, which meant that when Indian patrols got into a heated argument with their Chinese counterparts, they resorted to more primitive implements.

As India's Prime Minister Modi and Chinese President Xi make public gestures of friendship, the territorial dispute between their countries in the Himalayan highlands remains an acute nexus of the contradictions of South Asian politics. Both China and India have over a billion people to feed and keep warm, and face potential issues with both energy and food security. Both countries jostle to become a regional leader in Asia just as the United States withdraws from global politics. Both countries have to delicately balance their need for economic growth and development with increasingly obvious realities of climate change. Neither country will back down.

The decision makers in Beijing are acutely aware of how precarious their position is when it comes to energy access. Their supply lines for oil are very long, stretching either from the Persian Gulf and around India or through harsh and remote stretches of Siberia, hostage to fickle Russian politics and unreliable maintenance schedules. In any potential conflict over Taiwan, either India or the First Island Chain countries (including close US allies Japan and the Philippines) could disrupt the flow of oil to China. The solution? Rapid electrification of the transportation infrastructure and reducing the dependence of the Chinese energy grid on oil and gas.

At the same time, China depends heavily on imports for its food, particularly soybeans and pork from the United States and Brazil. While China is trying to diversify its food supply chains, BRICS remains little more than a cute acronym. As the spectre of economic or military confrontation rises, Chinese leaders are looking to increase their domestic food production and make sure the citizenry doesn't grab pitchforks and go on long walks together.

India is everything China isn't. India is young and its population is rapidly growing. It has a vast untapped workforce, which includes women whose employment rate is only 32%. India is democratic, and (with very notable and important exceptions) New Delhi enjoys broad consent of the governed. India's food imports account for only 5% of the calorie intake (vs Chinese 20%) and only represent the highest end of the market. India's port access is unconstrained by hostile neighbors, and its supply chains are much shorter.

At the same time, India's population is rapidly urbanizing, and the middle class is growing. India's energy demands are rapidly growing as rural electricity access improves and people buy personal cars and equip their homes with AC. While domestic food production is strong, 16% of the population is still malnourished. Climate change means increased flooding and saltwater intrusion into agricultural lands, which endangers agriculture.

To both countries, the control of the Himalayas can seem like a solution. These lands hold more glacial freshwater than anywhere else except for Antarctica and Greenland. With the cold climate wringing out the moisture from the Pacific and Indian Ocean oceanic winds, this area is considered the Water Tower of Asia. Whoever controls these highlands will get to control the river's flow and can benefit from building dams and directing the water flow towards irrigated agriculture, improving domestic food production. Additionally, holding Akasai Chin for China means that India has to worry about potentially fighting both nuclear powers of Pakistan and China in this difficult region - a prospect of a two-front conflict that China very much would like to keep holding over India should Modi get any cute ideas about restricting the energy flow to

China, siding with Philippines in the South China Sea dispute or helping US defend Taiwan should it get there.

Finally, both the Chinese and Indian leaders think long-term and understand that with climate change, the time to get access to freshwater resources is now. Water is one resource that is incredibly difficult to transport at the scales required, and they rightfully believe controlling a geographic high point where the water flows from is important for the long-term survival of the countries.

What can we do to prevent another Galwan Valley Battle? Ultimately, the United States benefits from a peaceful Indo-Pacific as it makes trade easier and helps us establish more productive relations with both regional powers, aimed at increasing welfare in the region. Peaceful India and China, secure in their food production, are the best bet for stability in Asia. However, given the caliber of the countries and the issues involved, the American role will necessarily have to be limited to mediation.

One potential solution the United States could advocate would be to expand the framework of the current agreement banning firearms to ban military personnel within two kilometers of the line of actual control. Instead of foot patrols, a series of ground vibration sensors could be installed that would notify either side of any cross-border intrusions. The countries could rely on the remote monitoring of the sensors for their security while withdrawing the military personnel from close proximity to each other and sparing them the harsh conditions of the Galwan Valley and similar locations.

Long-term, the United States diplomats should involve regional players (Russia, Australia, Japan) in helping mediate a border demarcation that will enable the countries to share the Himalayan water equitably.

India and China are headed for a race to become the next superpower and are competing for resources, shipment lane control, better technical education, more self-sustaining agriculture, and a strong manufacturing base. The conflict for the ill-defined border in the Himalayan highlands remains a microcosm of the countries' competition and carries enormous spoils for the victor.