

The Big Read Indian politics & policy

Can India build a military strong enough to deter China?



Violent clashes in Ladakh in 2020 acted as a wake-up call for New Delhi. But some say India is still not doing or spending enough as tensions rise

John Reed in New Delhi and **Chloe Cornish** in Mumbai 10 HOURS AGO


Until the spring of 2020, China and India took elaborate precautions to avoid tensions along the shared northern border where they had fought a war almost six decades earlier.

Soldiers along the Line of Actual Control, as India and China call the disputed border between the Indian territory of Ladakh and China's Tibet and Xinjiang provinces, would typically patrol unarmed, sometimes leaving cigarette packets or other local-language litter in the buffer zone to signal to the other side that they had been there.

When patrols from the Indian Armed Forces and People's Liberation Army physically met, they would display banners warning the other side that they had encroached on their national territory, and ordering them to retreat.

But in April and May 2020, Chinese troops broke this status quo when they cut off some of the Indians' traditional patrol routes in eastern Ladakh. Shouted arguments and fistfights escalated into soldiers attacking one another with clubs and stones. By the end of the clashes, 20 Indian soldiers and four Chinese soldiers were reported dead.





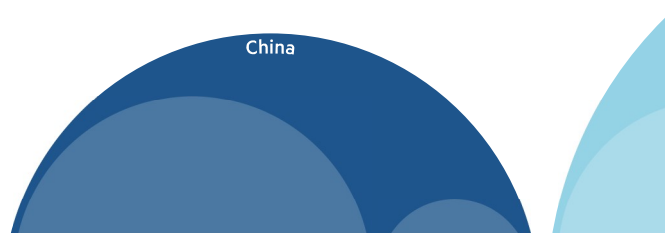
Chinese and Indian troops clash at the Line of Actual Control in the Galwan Valley, in the Himalayas, in 2020 © CCTV/AFP/Getty Images

Today the border is quiet, but the clashes are still reverberating in New Delhi and analysts say future clashes between the world's two most populous countries cannot be ruled out.

The incident in the Galwan Valley acted as a wake-up call to India's military and civilian establishment about the risk of future, broader confrontation with China and its well-equipped armed forces — and the need to counter it. India also banned dozens of Chinese mobile apps, part of a drive to bolster its defences in a rivalry Narendra Modi's government believes is being fought on the technological front too.

Fighting power: the millions serving in combat forces

Numbers of military personnel, by country (click on a circle to see a further breakdown by branch of service)



“It was a shock to the Indian side,” says Deependra Hooda, who headed the Indian Army’s Northern Command in 2014-16, noting that the last fatal clashes in the border area had been in 1975. “There has definitely been a rethink — not only a rethink, but a realignment of forces, with priority given to the northern front.”

After the Galwan clashes, India redeployed six army divisions from its northern front along the border with its traditional foe Pakistan to northern Ladakh.



German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, left, tours the Chandni Chowk market area of New Delhi last week. During her visit, she addressed India-China military concerns © Adnan Abidi/Reuters

Bipin Rawat, then India’s chief of staff, last year described China as India’s biggest security threat, and said the Chinese were “building villages, possibly for billeting and

security threat, and said the Chinese were building villages, possibly for dining and locating their civilians or for the military in the future all along the LAC”.

German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock, on a visit to Delhi last week, mentioned China “building their military infrastructure . . . along the border with India” among Berlin’s concerns, suggesting either that the topic was at the top of her mind or that her hosts had briefed her on it.

“Following Galwan, China after decades was perceived by the Indian public and policymakers as a clear and present challenge,” says Dhruva Jaishankar, executive director of the Observer Research Foundation America, a think-tank. “There was a wider realisation that the military power of China could not be managed by diplomatic agreements alone, and would require India to take its own military and economic steps.”

China and India increase spending on armed forces

Military expenditure, current \$ rebased
(2010=100)



India's defence spending had already increased by 50 per cent over a decade, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), from \$49.6bn in 2011 to \$76.6bn last year.

Over the same period, it passed Russia and the UK to become the world's third-biggest military spender — albeit far behind the US and China, which spent nearly four times as much as it did. Spending is still growing; in the government's February budget, the defence allocation was increased by almost 10 per cent.

New Delhi's priorities have been to modernise the military, but also to ensure it has sustainable military industrial capacity — part of a broader "Make in India" campaign meant to build up local manufacturing. Analysts say the war in Ukraine has brought home another key vulnerability: India's lingering reliance on Russian arms and munitions.



India has intensified the long-underway diversification of its supplies towards other countries, including France and Israel. Only months after Galwan, India signed a new defence agreement with the US. At the same time, it is pushing ahead with an "indigenisation" effort meant to build up its domestic production capacity.

Yet some analysts argue that India is still not doing or spending enough to prepare

itself for possible confrontation with China. In particular, some observers warn that prime minister Modi needs to choose whether the modernisation of the Indian Armed Forces, or the indigenisation of military hardware should be the priority. Trying to do both at the same time risks leaving it exposed to China's far stronger military, they say.

“By reorienting its forces, India was able to avoid any further embarrassment or loss of territory,” says Sushant Singh, senior fellow at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi. “But India has not done anything major to enhance its military strength.”

Homegrown arms









India's drive to build an indigenous military industry dates back decades to its early years of independence, when it began using foreign technology to develop locally built weaponry, including a combat aircraft and a self-loading rifle.

But only public sector companies were allowed into the defence business and indigenisation stalled, leaving India as one of the world's top military importers.

The need to speed up indigenisation was sharpened by the 2020 Galwan clashes. To galvanise its defence production, in August 2020 India began introducing staggered import bans on hundreds of military hardware components, now ranging from springs to surveillance equipment and patrol boats. Some of the bans have taken effect almost immediately and others will do so as late as 2032.

India and China compete for air supremacy

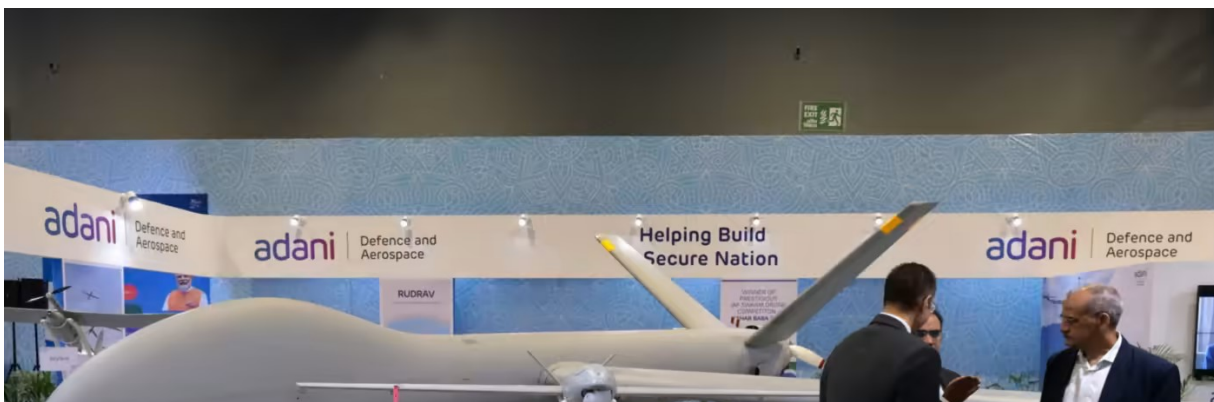
Fixed-wing combat-capable aircraft, one aircraft icon represents 10 aircraft

-  Bombers
-  Fighters
-  Fighter/ground attack
-  Attack
-  Electronic warfare
-  ISR*
-  Anti-submarine
-  Training aircraft with combat capability

“There is an understanding in New Delhi that being dependent on other powers is not conducive to strategic autonomy,” says Anit Mukherjee, a former Indian Army major and associate professor at Singapore’s S Rajaratnam School of International Studies. “We need to make sure we have our own capabilities because it’s not just the Russians: any other country supplying weapons to India might impede our foreign policy choices.”

Yet the process of pivoting away from Russian arms supplies has been slow, given that Russian munitions are mostly cheaper than western alternatives, and because India needs to maintain legacy systems and weaponry dating back to Soviet days.

Eventually they might be replaced by homegrown defence production, in keeping with the “Make in India” push to onshore manufacturing by strategic industries. But that will not be quick, either. “Their Make in India campaign poses some risk,” a western diplomat says. “If you try to flip the switch and say everything has to be made in India, can you do that fast enough without losing ground?”





Gautam Adani's defence and aerospace business is partnering with Israel's Elbit to manufacture unmanned aircraft © T Narayan/Bloomberg

Enter India's billionaire-owned conglomerates, which have begun moving into defence, joining public sector companies such as Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL), which makes the Tejas light combat jet, and Russian-Indian joint venture BrahMos, which makes a supersonic cruise missile.

Gautam Adani, India's richest man, launched a defence and aerospace business in 2015. It is now partnering with Israel's Elbit to manufacture unmanned aircraft. Adani is also partnering with Israel Weapons Industries, best known for developing the Uzi, to produce machineguns and rifles in India.

Tata Sons' aerospace and defence division has long-running joint ventures with Lockheed Martin and Boeing, for which it makes aircraft sections. But it recently began designing and building its own aircraft and weapons system, including drones and an artillery gun.

"Frankly, we have built it up without any orders and in many cases with no government funding," says Sukaran Singh, Tata Advanced Systems' chief executive, of its military technology development.

India struggles to compete with China on the high seas

Naval forces, principal surface combatants and submarines

- Missile submarines
- Other submarines
- Aircraft carriers
- Cruisers
- Destroyers
- Frigates

India's native capacity to build war-fighting machines now spans light combat helicopters, fighter jets, tanks, and rockets. In September Modi, at a commissioning ceremony for India's first domestically constructed aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant, in the southern port of Kochi, hailed it as a "symbol of indigenous potential", with three-quarters of it made by Indian industry, according to the navy.

Yet a string of indigenously produced helicopters have crashed during training flights, with the latest accident killing five people in October. The setbacks have underscored the challenges India faces as it tries to build a military in better fighting form.

The cost of war

Budgetary constraints do not help. Over two-thirds of the military budget goes to salaries, pensions, and routine services for army, navy and air force personnel, with less than a third going to capital expenditure on military systems and arms.

In one effort to overhaul its cost structure, India's military in June introduced the Agnipath ("Path of Fire") scheme, under which soldiers are recruited on short-term contracts, but after their fourth year only 25 per cent of each intake is offered a full military career.

The scheme has proved unpopular, prompting protests in several Indian states and angering neighbouring Nepal, which recruits Gurkhas to the IAF under an agreement dating back to British colonial days.



Congress party leaders and workers hold placards as they shout slogans against Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a demonstration over the government's new 'Agnipath' recruitment scheme for the army, navy and air force in Amritsar in June this year © Narinder Nanu/AFP/Getty Images

Even with a more aggressive China, the argument for spending more on defence is a difficult one for Modi in particular to make.

For the prime minister's nationalist government, the choice between guns and butter is especially challenging as economic development and upliftment of India's poor is a central part of his Bharatiya Janata party's pitch to voters, and legitimacy since he took office in 2014. The Indian leader in 2016 undertook "surgical strikes" in Pakistan following a deadly attack on Indian soldiers, which has since then been used by the BJP as proof of their tough security stance.

However, China is a far stronger adversary that Indians acknowledge they would struggle to outspend, much less outfight. The calculus is complex, analysts say, as only by delivering consistently faster economic growth than China — as India currently is doing — can it afford to spend more on defence.

"In both military and civilian quarters in India, everyone is looking at Ukraine," says Anand Singh, a defence analyst. "They see the cost of war and realise, 'We can't afford

Angad Singh, a defence analyst. “They see the cost of war and realise, we can’t afford it.”

The risk of escalation

For New Delhi, the objective at least in the short term is to avoid a confrontation that will expose the gulf in capabilities between China and India.

“Modi doesn’t want to get into a clash with Xi, and if there is one wild card that can upset his government and severely diminish his stature, it’s the Chinese,” says Manoj Joshi, a distinguished fellow at the Observer Research Foundation and author of a book on the India-China border dispute. “They are very careful with the Chinese.”

Yet some analysts believe new clashes with China are likely, and not only in Ladakh. Analysts believe the risk is greatest in the far north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, where India’s troops are more thinly spread and its infrastructure less developed, and the entirety of which China considers part of Tibet and claims as its territory.



Two naval officers stand beside a MiG 29 fighter jet parked on the runway of the INS Vikrant aircraft carrier, which was commissioned by the Modi government © Arun Sankar/AFP/Getty Images

The threat is not limited to the border. Satellite photos from Beijing’s port at Djibouti, about 2,000 nautical miles from Mumbai, show Chinese naval vessels docked there,

suggesting that in future China could project its power in the Indian Ocean too.

India's navy is only a fraction of the size of China's, and its assets are especially in need of investment. India's first aircraft carrier, the Soviet-built INS Vikramaditya, is in maintenance. The Modi government commissioned a second, the INS Vikrant, but it is not yet ready to land navy jets, and pilots are for now conducting test flights from a base at Goa.

Underscoring the lingering risk of conflict, Beijing this month objected to this year's joint India-US military exercises in the northern state of Uttarakhand, about 100km from the Chinese border.

India's government responded that it "exercises with whomever it chooses", and would give no veto to third countries on the issue. A US official said, in reference to China's objections, that it was "none of their business".

India will hope that exchanges with its neighbour get no more aggressive than that in coming months, as analysts say the fundamental imbalance in military power between the two remains unchanged.

"The Chinese look at the US as their peer competitor," says Joshi. "That is trouble for India, since the Chinese effort and resources being deployed to take on the US will give them a capability boost that India cannot hope to match."

Data visualisation by [Ian Bott](#)

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