



Original Article

The western sector of Ladakh as a zone of conflict Political perspectives on the India- China border dispute

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Manuscript ID:
RIGJAAR-2026-030107

ISSN: 2998-4459
Volume 3
Issue 1
Pp. 42-48
January 2026

Submitted: 07 Dec. 2025
Revised: 15 Dec. 2025
Accepted: 10 Jan. 2026
Published: 31 Jan. 2026

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Quick Response Code:



Web: <https://rlgjaar.com>



DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.18522991

DOI Link:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18522991>



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Abstract

This study examines the western frontier of Ladakh as a persistent zone of military and political confrontation between India and China. It analyzes the structural and political foundations of the border dispute with a focus on sovereignty, territorial claims, strategic calculations, and domestic political pressures. The paper traces the historical evolution of the conflict from colonial era boundary ambiguities to post independence negotiations and contemporary military standoffs. It shows that the absence of a formally demarcated and mutually accepted boundary has produced enduring uncertainty, particularly around differing interpretations of the Line of Actual Control. This ambiguity has allowed periodic escalation and reinforced mutual suspicion between the two states. The study also evaluates the role of nationalism, state legitimacy, and regional power competition in shaping policy responses on both sides. It argues that domestic political needs and nationalist narratives often constrain diplomatic flexibility and encourage hardline positions. By situating the Ladakh dispute within a broader geopolitical context, the paper highlights how strategic infrastructure development, military deployments, and alliance dynamics have intensified the conflict. The study treats Ladakh not only as a physical borderland but also as a contested political space where security, identity, and governance intersect. It concludes that long term stability cannot be achieved through military deterrence alone. Sustained political engagement, confidence building measures, and a clearer institutional framework for border management are necessary to reduce tensions and prevent future crises.

Keywords: Border dispute, Ladakh, India China relations, Geopolitics, Sovereignty, National security.

Introduction

The western part of the Ladakh region has a strategic location in the political geography of South Asia. This high plateau area lies at the crossroad in India and China and has been a target of strategic competition in decades. The border issue in this industry is one of the most long standing and multi-dimensional territorial issues in the modern international politics. It is framed by the ambiguity of history, national rival accounts and changing power dynamics. Contrary to most of the boundary disputes that are solved, the India China conflict in the Ladakh region continues because of the lack of an officially accepted border, and the involved state attributes a strong political value to control of the territories.

In terms of political science, the issues of borders are seldom about territory. They represent bigger interests in the form of sovereignty, national identity, and legitimacy of the regimes. In the example of Ladakh, these aspects are magnified by the importance of the region to the nation and its symbolic role in the domestic political discourse. In the case of India, Ladakh is a constituent of the constitutional territory of the state. A sense of being powerless is politically expensive and brings up concerns on national cohesion. In the case of China, the western sector is highly associated with the internal security and territorial integration especially with regard to Tibet and Xinjiang. The dominance of Aksai Chin makes it strategically connected and strengthens the government of the central state in the west regions. The origins of the dispute can be traced to the colonial era during which British administrators created several and rather contradictory maps of the Himalayan border.

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How to cite this article:

Ishaq, S. (2026). The western sector of Ladakh as a zone of conflict Political perspectives on the India- China border dispute. *Royal International Global Journal of Advance and Applied Research*, 3(1), 42-48. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18522991>

Without proper political resolution, these cartographic ambiguities were passed over to the post-colonial states. This led to India and China going into the post-independence period with conflicting claims in regard to territories. These disputes were changed into a military conflict in 1962 and formed the trend of suspicion that is still used to define bilateral relationships. Although there has been diplomatic involvement at times, the inherent political issue regarding the boundary has not been resolved.

Over the past years, the western part of Ladakh has become a hotbed with the frequent military confrontations and the increased rhetoric rates. There has been an escalation of infrastructure work, troop concentration and signaling on both sides. These changes are indicative of the shifts in the regional power dynamics and the increasing significance of the Indo Pacific in the world politics. Ladakh has therefore turned out to be a place where local territorial claims are overlapping with the geopolitical contest.

This study aims at examining the western region of Ladakh as a conflict zone based on a political perspective. It tries to go beyond the journalism of the military events and rather to concentrate on the political forces behind the conflict. The article, through its analysis of historical legacies, strategic calculations, domestic political factors, as well as diplomatic efforts, gives a detailed explanation of why the conflict is still ongoing. This type of analysis is quite critical in examining the future of peace and stability in one of the most sensitive border areas in Asia.

Historical roots of the western sector dispute

The conflict in the western region of Ladakh is essentially entrenched in unresolved colonial practices of making boundaries that were neither legal nor politically agreed. In the nineteenth century, British colonial officials treated the Himalayan frontier as first of all a buffer zone, which was to defend imperial interests in the Indian sub-continent. The aim was not to come up with a well negotiated international boundary but to come up with flexible frontier zones that would absorb the external pressures. Consequently, demarcation of boundaries in Ladakh was vague and not uniform. A number of boundaries were suggested at this time that showed changing priorities in the empire, and not consistent legal principles. The line of the 1860s between the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was stretched far into the Aksai Chin, to a great extent in reaction to the perceived Russian influence in Central Asia. Subsequently British officials changed their mind and suggested other alignments including the McCartney MacDonald Line, which put Aksai Chin to the east. These rival cartographical images did not undergo any collective bargaining with China and did not have any ground demarcation. Therefore, the border was more of a cartographic than a politically curbed border.

The ambiguities were bequeathed at the time of Indian independence in 1947 without any official decision. India followed the example set by the Johnson Line and used it as the foundation of their territorial claim arguing that it was an extension of the established administrative borders. This was due to the need to establish sovereignty and continuity of territory following the colonial rule. After

the creation of the People Republic in 1949, China discarded such boundaries of the colonial era, which it considered as unilaterally imposed without any mutual consent.

Since the early period of unification of the state, the main agenda of China was to consolidate the hold on the outer lands especially Tibet and Xinjiang. What happened in 1950s changed the situation in the dispute decisively when the Xinjiang Tibet road was built through Aksai Chin. What was once a cartographic conflict had turned to be a strategic and political confrontation. The highway made the region important strategically and raised Indian issues of sovereignty. The 1962 war militarization solidified the border and established conflicting claims. Ever since the conflict in question, the disagreement has been entrenched at the level of historical grievance, unresolved sovereignty issues, and systematic distrust, which constitute the structural basis of present-day tension in western Ladakh.

Territorial claims and sovereignty

The western Ladakh territorial claims are deeply connected with the state sovereignty and the political legitimacy. In the case of India, Ladakh is a state of this country. Sovereignty is described as a legal and political term which is supported by the power of the parliaments and the administrative control. Any compromise is seen to undermine the territorial integrity of the state. This is an idea that influences policy and constrains the space of negotiation.

In the case of China, national unification and internal security are connected to sovereignty of Aksai Chin. The region links two politically harsh regions, Tibet and Xinjiang. The ability to control this area can be used to govern it effectively and to move the military fast. Chinese demands are formulated as historical and strategic needs and not as expansionist demands. Sovereignty is in both instances a non-negotiable issue. This narrow thinking transforms an issue of border location into a zero sum politics in which compromise is expensive politically at home.

Strategic and military importance

The western side of Ladakh has turned out to be among the best militarized high altitude areas in the world. The region has great strategic location in spite of severe weather and geography. High grounds are also controlled and thus make it possible to monitor large regions. Mobility in operations and defense depth are guaranteed by dominance of key passes. All these factors contribute to the strategic value of the region over and above the economic or demographic value.

Military competition has been enhanced due to the development of infrastructure. The presence of roads, bridges, airstrips, and forward bases has reduced the response time and the presence of troops. Political authorization and strategic planning lead to these developments. Both parties consider the other to have a threat to the status quo by the infrastructure they have. This view brings about the dilemma of security whereby defensive exercise is viewed as offensive intentions. The presence of military preparedness in the western Ladakh can

consequently be attributed to political signaling rather than requirements of security.

Line of Actual Control and ambiguity

The Line of Actual Control is the key to the conflict persistence in western Ladakh. It is an informal border with no legal demarcation or mapping. The alignment perception of both India and China differs. Patrols will operate to the claim lines of each side resulting in high frequency of contact.

This ambiguity has been perpetuated by political leadership on either side. Formal explanation would involve a compromise, which is a political issue. Ambiguity gives a present of flexibility and maintains claims. It also enlarges the confrontation risk, however. Strategic restrictions imposed on local commanders is influenced by the politics of the nation. At the tactical level, incidences usually lead to diplomatic crises. It is the undefined nature of the Line of Actual Control that, therefore, continues to be a structural source of instability.

Role of domestic politics in India

The politics of India at the domestic level is decisive when it comes to policy decisions on the western part of the Ladakh. The problems of the border are not addressed as the ordinary foreign policy ones. They are posed as a matter of national integrity, state power, and political integrity. This framing has a far reaching impact on executive and legislative decision making. The concept of territorial sovereignty takes a pivotal position among Indian politics. The perception of India as a single and indivisible nation is entrenched in the constitution and supported by the society. Any form of threat to the territorial claims is seen as a threat to sovereignty. Political leaders in the framework of Ladakh are under intense normative pressure not to compromise on border protection. This pressure spans the party lines and narrows the policy flexibility. Even moderate or pragmatic styles are taking risks to be considered as politically weak.

This is further enhanced by Electoral politics. Amplified political mobilization is usually accompanied by border crises. The political parties incorporate the national security narratives in their efforts to garner the masses. Effective reactions to external threats will be considered a sign of assertive leadership. This gives incentives to governments to assume strict positions, despite the fact that diplomatic restraint could ease tensions. Opposition parties also serve this environment by doubting the will of the ruling leadership and as such, limit the options of the conciliatory engagement. The media is important in the formation of the opinion of people on border disputes. The nationalistic feeling is enhanced due to the ongoing news of military standoffs in Ladakh. Incidences are framed by the Television debates and editorials as challenges on national honor and political determination. Difficult geopolitical conditions are simplified and broken down into simplistic accounts of violence and retaliation. This is the media environment that political leaders work in and have to consider the perception of the people in their policy formulation. Consequently, the domestic political

communication becomes strongly connected with the border management strategies.

The India approach to the Ladakh dispute is also influenced by the institutional factors. The civil military relations in India give a civil leadership a high authority, yet the military evaluations have a high score in border policy. Security institutions are used by political leaders to legitimize infrastructure development, troop deployment as well as strategic signaling. After publicly setting such measures as a necessity of national security, it would be politically hard to reverse them or soften them. Directional responsibility at home, therefore, strengthens a process of intensification led by political promises.

The political change was of the awarding of administrative reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir and the establishment of Ladakh as a Union Territory. This ruling further centralized direct control over the territory and in effect restored sovereignty. At the national level it was put as a statement of political power and national incorporation. Towards the India China relations, this action increased the sensitivities of Ladakh. Any foreign intrusion of the territorial claims following this restructuring had more political implications. The territorial region started gaining presence in the national politics and being more directly connected to the legitimacy of the central government.

The issue of nationalism continues to dominate the Indian politics. The past experiences of colonialism and conflicts influence collective memory and the threat perception. The 1962 war with China still has an impact on the political stories and the way of thinking. The political leaders are usually wary that they would be perceived as complacent or illogical in their handling with China. This sense of history supports an interest in aggressive policies and observable predatory preparedness in Ladakh.

Negotiation behavior is also influenced by domestic political institutions. This is because the parliamentary scrutiny, open debates and judicial oversight make it hard to maintain secrecy and compromise. In contrast to authoritarian models, Indian leaders do not have options but have to explain to a large audience the foreign policy decisions. Such openness enhances the accountability in democracy as well as limiting the flexibility of diplomacy. When brought under discussion and political debate, border negotiations involving silent compromise are opposed.

There is the complexity of federal dynamics. Regional politics influence national discourse despite the fact that foreign policy is one of the main topics. The local issues in Ladakh related to development, security, and representation are fed into the national discourse. The political leaders have to strike a balance between the strategic goals and the regional expectations. It is this balancing act which makes the formulation and implementation of policies more complex.

Summing up, the domestic politics of India predispose the national attitude towards the western part of Ladakh greatly. The policy options are made under the influence of sovereignty discourses, electoral rivalry, media opinion, organization, and nationalism. These aspects do not guarantee results alone but they generate a political climate where hard line gets rewarded and compromise is

dangerous. The Ladakh dispute cannot be understood thus merely based on external strategic calculations but close attention has to be paid to the internal political dynamics.

Role of domestic politics in China

In China, nationalist ideology and centralized decision making shape the border policy. Territorial integrity is brought out as one of the central values of state legitimacy. The leadership focuses on the control of the border areas so as to guarantee stability in the ethnically and politically sensitive areas. Particular importance in this context is attached to Tibet and Xinjiang. Popular rhetoric and governmental discourses support a powerful position on the issue of the territorial conflicts. Compromise is seen as something that is not acceptable due to the pressure of outsourcing. The political system is more oriented on stability and authority and does not allow much room to negotiate which can be seen as concession. This home setting adds to the rigidity in the attitude towards the western part of Ladakh.

Diplomatic mechanisms and their limits

India and China have come up with various diplomatic and military processes to control the border tensions. These encompass the peace and tranquility agreements, building of confidence and the organized forms

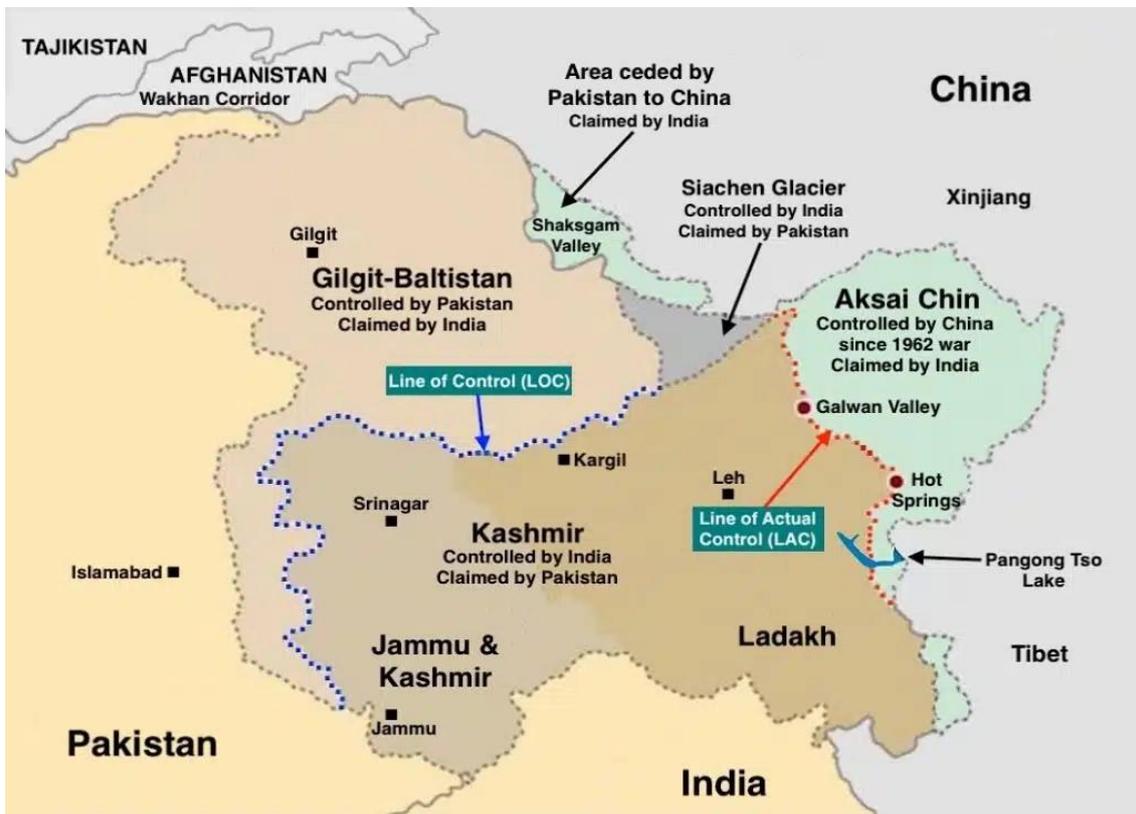
of dialogue. The objectives of these mechanisms are to avoid escalation and sustain communication.

Although these arrangements have minimized the chances of the occurrence of large scale war, they have not solved the dispute. Their performance is pegged on political trust that is limited. There is no clarification of boundaries, which is detrimental to implementation. Every crisis shows disjunctions between official principles and low level conduct. The western Ladakh approach to diplomacy has been a crisis management, as opposed to conflict management approach.

Changing regional and global context

The Ladakh row in the West is becoming more dependent on the wider geopolitical events. The perceptions and policies are influenced by strategic alliances between India and China as well as the growing regional power of China. The heightened tensions on the border have taken a new perspective of power rivalry at regional levels. This is an international aspect that makes bilateral engagement difficult. A more important role is played by strategic signaling and deterrence. Threat perceptions and choices of policy are affected by external alignments. Western Ladakh thereby has ceased to be a bilateral territorial problem to be included in broader geopolitical calculations.

Western Ladakh as a permanent conflict zone



The Western Ladakh has slowly become a structurally embedded conflict zone, which is not a transient location of bilateral tension. This change has been brought about by a longstanding political conflict, unresolved territorial issue and continued military presence. The region

is in the features of long term conflict zones, where conflicts are handled, yet not sorted, where the stability is weak and conditional. The lack of an agreed boundary is also one of the characteristic features of western Ladakh as a permanent conflict zone. The Line of Actual Control is more of a tentative and indistinct demarcation that is not a legal

border. Its ambiguity allows India and China to make overlapping claims without officially changing the positions they have. This ambiguity has been institutionalized. Political leadership in both sides condones it since, a formal clarification will entail politically expensive compromises. Consequently, the area is still susceptible to repeated conflicts, without the a priori increase. The ongoing militarization is something that strengthens the permanence of the conflict in western Ladakh. Gradually, the two states have made the region a forward military theater. The use of permanent troop deployments, surveillance and logistics networks have substituted previous patterns of seasonal or symbolic presence. An infrastructure related to the military has been created to mobilize quickly and be sustained. This degree of readiness is more of long term strategic planning, as opposed to short term crisis response. The military presence in itself changes the political environment by making confrontational behavior a norm and demilitarization incentives low.

In western Ladakh, the security dilemma is very acute. Any steps made by one party in order to strengthen defense are construed by the other party as aggression. There is a mindset of suspicion towards infrastructure development, the frequency of patrol and modernization of the force. These actions are presented by the political leadership as the need to protect the country, which strengthens the support of militarization at home. In the long-term, this relationship forms a vicious cycle where the tighter security measures are, the more countermeasures are warranted. The war therefore gets entrenched in the normal practice of the state. The presence of institutional mechanisms to deal with tensions is ironically making the conflict permanent. Confidence building, military hotlines, and diplomatic conversations are a way of stopping the escalation and not a way of solving the dispute itself. These processes maintain confrontation as opposed to removing it. They minimize the possibility of the large scale war by keeping the conflict small-controlled. Through political leadership, one can purport to be stable without having to negotiate hard on boundary settlement. This is a type of conflict management that builds the status quo.

Western Ladakh is a symbolic political space as well. To both China and India, dominating the region is more than strategic benefit. It is an expression of the authority of the state, determination and legitimacy. Ladakh as a national will is defined in political narratives. These kinds of symbolism make matters tough and constrain compromise. When territory is the source of political identity, retreat or accommodation is described as the loss of status as opposed to strategic realignment. The conflict is further rooted in environmental and geographic conditions. The extreme weather and geographical conditions restrict civic settlement and an economy. This lowers domestic demands to normalize and peace. Western Ladakh does not have high cross border social or economic interconnections that could foster cooperation as opposed to densely populated border areas. Military and administrative players continue to dominate the region and their interests are informed by security factors.

Wider geopolitical changes are also responsible in keeping the conflict in western Ladakh permanent. Mutual distrust is strengthened by changes in the balance of power in the region and the strategic rivalry occurring on the global level. Agreements concerning border tensions are viewed as a more broad strategy rivalry. This is the external environment that does not value compromise and promotes long term military preparedness. Western Ladakh will therefore be a position in a bigger strategic game as opposed to a solitary conflict. Lastly, crisis is normalized in western Ladakh, which is a defining factor to its status as a zone of permanent conflict. The constant confrontation and negotiation has established habitual patterns of conduct, which are known and expected by both parties. The event of crisis becomes ordinary as opposed to extraordinary. Political and military establishments to this fact, which again institutionalizes conflict within a governance system. The tension is expected to be a normal condition of the region with time. Academically, western Ladakh is a classic example of a borderland that is yet to be resolved and is turned into a controlled conflict zone. Without the resolution, the prolonged militarization and the symbolism of politics will guarantee the tension. Until the political differences underlying the conflict are resolved, western Ladakh is bound to continue being a tumultuous zone that is under temporary stability at best and permanent peace at worst.

Implications for regional stability

The continuation of unrest in the western part of Ladakh has very far-reaching consequences on stability in South Asia and the continent at large. In spite of the fact that the dispute is located on a narrow geographic scale, the political and strategic impacts are spread throughout the regional security framework. The incurableness of the conflict poses an ongoing element of uncertainty that impacts the interstate relations, armed strategy and diplomatic alliances. On the bilateral level, the continuous tensions in western Ladakh limit the entire relationship between China and India. Border standoffs create political mistrust that is spilled over to other areas of cooperation. Economic activity, cross-border coordination, and people to people activities are always prone to being derailed whenever there is an increased level of tension. The border conflict therefore serves as a structural impediment to a stable bilateral relationship to restrict the possibility of long term cooperation between two of the main Asian giants.

The war further increases militarization in the Himalayan area. India and China have invested heavily to sustain and develop military forces in the high altitude areas. This continued emphasis on border security steals the funds and administration on the development agenda. Arguably, heightened military spending especially in rugged terrain has long term economic impact. To other state neighbors, this militarization is an indication of a shaky security environment, which strengthens the insecurity in the region. Western Ladakh leads to an increased probability of miscalculation and unintentional escalation. The fact that opposing forces are located close to each other with unclear borders preconditions the situation when small



incidences may quickly grow out of scale. This risk is further increased by political pressure to respond strongly. Necessarily, both domestic and strategic considerations restrict the possibility of de-escalation even in a situation where the leaders want to act restraints. The possibility of developing a crisis (although unintentional) is a grave threat to stability in the region.

Perceptions and alignments of regional security are also impacted by the dispute. The need to have strategic alliances with the other key powers is another reason why India is involved in the border behavior of China. Such alliances determine the regional power equilibrium and create back-lash by China. Consequently, the Ladakh conflict is incorporated into the larger dynamics of the strategic contestation. The smaller states in the region are taking note of such dynamics and change their foreign policies to suit them, usually balancing between the big powers in order to protect their own interests. The Ladakh dispute indirectly affects multilateral regional institutions. Regional cooperation platforms are restricted in case of major members being at war. The lack of trust is a problem that destroys consensus-building and reduces the efficacy of regional activity. The conflict therefore inhibits the establishment of cooperative security systems in Asia.

This also impacts human security as well as development. The presence of the military limits the movement of civilians and economic activity in the border regions. The vulnerability of delicate mountain ecosystems is further enhanced by environmental pressure due to the development of infrastructure and the presence of troops. Such agents decrease the chances of sustainable development and social stability in border areas, and have implications of long term resilience of regions.

Globally, the Ladakh conflict is a factor that is seen to make Asia appear as a region where unresolved territorial conflicts exist. This image affects foreign investment, foreign affairs and foreign policies. The persistent economic and political opportunities facing the region by the global players are seen through the prism of a risk sensitive approach. Academically, the conflict in western Ladakh is a destabilizing element in the politics in the region. Its consequences go out beyond two-way competition to affect military actions, diplomatic alliances, and institutional collaboration in the Asian continent. The lack of significant political involvement towards diminishing mistrust and defining of boundaries will keep on disrupting the stability of the region with the dispute propagating the trend of strategic competition instead of cooperation.

Conclusion

The result of this study is the western part of Ladakh that becomes a very rooted area of political antagonism that is influenced by the history, the claims of sovereignty, domestic politics and the primary struggle between strategies. The discussion reveals that there is no way to transform the India China border conflict in this region into individual military confrontations or land map disagreement. It is a result of decades of structural factors that still generate instability. The ambiguities of the boundaries during the colonial era provided the grounds of

rivalry on the territorial claims, and post-independence state building converted the ambiguities to the issue of national identity and legitimacy. Lacking an agreed point of demarcation has institutionalized the state of uncertainty and accepted confrontation across the Line of Actual Control.

The study underscores the fact that the domestic politics in the country is also of great importance to maintain the conflict. Democratic accountability, electoral politics, media discourses, and nationalism in India provide powerful motivation to aggressive border politics. Centralized power and nationalist thought coupled with domestic issues of security in China support the hard approach to territorial integrity. These domestic forces limit the diplomatic maneuvers on either side and turn border control into a politically charged topic. This leads to the fact that conflict resolution is secondary to conflict management.

The dispute is further entrenched by the strategic and the military considerations. The ongoing militarization and growth of infrastructure in the western Ladakh is a long term political signaling and not a short-term security action. Security dilemma is prevailing and the defensive behavior is perceived as offensive threats. Diplomatic tools and confidence building have managed to block the eruption of the full scale war, yet failed to solve the underlying issue of political conflict. They have instead helped to create a stable balance of tension as the conflict would continue to exist on a manageable level.

The study further shows that the Ladakh issue has other implications other than bilateral relations. It has determined the perceptions of security regions, has been instrumental in shaping the strategy alignment, and limiting the evolution of cooperative formations in Asia. The crisis-normality of western Ladakh enhances the danger of calculation error and consolidates strategies of competitive rivalry. The absence of political activity to curb mistrust and enhance a clear understanding of the perception is likely to keep the region a permanent conflict zone that is run on controlled instability.

Comprehensively, the western side of Ladakh is one of those examples where there is no clear-cut border, domestic political interests, and geopolitical rivalry. Political restraint, long term dialogue and the realization that militization alone will not bring long term peace will be needed to bring about sustainable stability. Until these circumstances develop, western Ladakh will remain as a fault line of critical fault lines in the Asian geopolitics.

Acknowledgment

The author wishes to express sincere gratitude to the faculty members of the Department of Political Science, Barkatullah University, Bhopal, for their academic guidance and constructive suggestions during the course of this research.

Special appreciation is extended to all scholars and researchers whose works have contributed to the conceptual framework and analysis of this study.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.



Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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