

**POWER, RHETORIC & PERCEPTION:
A REALIST ANALYSIS OF THREAT CONSTRUCTION IN INDIA-
CHINA RELATIONS POST-GALWAN CRISIS**

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ABSTRACT

The Galwan Valley clash in June 2020 changed the way India and China saw each other. It began as a military clash along the Line of Actual Control, but its effects went beyond that of a border conflict. It changed how both countries talked about security, how they built their narratives, and how they acted toward one another. This study analyses this shift through the lens of power, rhetoric and perception. It aims to understand how China's image as a threat changed within India's foreign policy after Galwan. In order to provide a clearer picture, the study compares Galwan to the 2017 Doklam standoff. It draws on public statements, official press releases, and parliamentary records from both India and China, examining them for shifts in tone, recurring themes, and how each country described the other's intentions. The findings show that both India and China constructed threats by blaming the other side's intentions. Each used existing bilateral agreements selectively, framing them in ways that supported its own position. Both also pointed to the other's infrastructure projects as evidence of an attempt to alter the existing situation on the ground. One key difference between the two crises lies in how they ended. Doklam was resolved through diplomatic talks, and both sides were able to present the outcome as a success. Galwan did not end this way. It led instead to a prolonged military stand-off, in which the confidence-building measures that had once been trusted lost their credibility rather than restoring it. Drawing on Walt's Balance of Threat Theory, the study argues that the shift in India's perception of China after Galwan was greater than what military economic changes alone could explain. This suggests that perception, shaped by narrative and rhetoric, played a role as significant as material capability itself. Briefly, the shift in India's view of China was not just about power. It was about how India and China told stories about each other, and how those stories reshaped the way India came to see China as a threat.

KEYWORDS: Indo-China relations, Galwan Crisis, Threat Construction, Balance of Threat Theory, Strategic Rhetoric, Realism, Line of Actual Control (LAC), Narrative and Perception

INTRODUCTION

On 15 June 2020, Indian and Chinese military forces posted along the long-disputed high-altitude frontier in the valley in Ladakh, along the Galwan river, close to the Aksai Chin region engaged in violent melee combat (BBC, 2020). While no shots were fired, both sides suffered casualties, with 20 deaths on India's side and 4 reported deaths from China (Gan, 2021). The Line of Actual control -- the LAC between India and China is a border shared by both countries and is more than 3440 kms long, with disputed territory on either side. The clash occurred here, in the Galwan river valley which lies to the west of the LAC, close to Aksai Chin (claimed by India, controlled by China). The battle took place at an altitude of nearly 14000 feet, where troops were not armed with mechanical weapons but with clubs, etc (Mandhana et al., 2020). There were also reports of some soldiers falling into the rapidly flowing 80km long Galwan river which ran sub-zero temps (BBC, 2020). The cause of the conflict in an otherwise peaceful area was because of India's road building project in one of the most remote and vulnerable areas along the LAC in Ladakh (BBC, 2020). This raised suspicion for China, because the construction of the road since 2019 created an advantage for movement of troops and material between New Delhi and the high-altitude forward air base as Daulat Beg Oldi in the case of a conflict (BBC, 2020).

The Galwan Valley clash marked a significant decline in India-China ties since the late 1980s. Before Galwan, the Doklam standoff from June to August 2017 was the primary source of India-China military tension. For this paper, Doklam and Galwan work as complementary comparisons: Doklam serves as a baseline to compare how threat perception changed after Galwan. Because Doklam involved comparable geographic stakes and a similarly serious military standoff, it is a useful control case: if India's rhetoric stayed measured here, despite real tension, then the sharper language after Galwan could simply be explained by border tension in general as it points to something specific about Galwan itself.

Objectives, key variables and research question

This study examines the shift in India-China relations after the Galwan crisis through a realist lens, focusing on how threat perception, rhetoric, and material capabilities interact to construct bilateral hostility outside the immediate border zone. The Doklam standoff of 2017 and the Galwan clash of 2020 serve as critical junctures to analyze institutional and ideational change. The central inquiry of this research is to examine how power, rhetoric, and perception combined to reconstruct the threat image of China in Indian foreign policy after the Galwan crisis in 2020. With Galwan and Doklam at the centre, the study poses a question of how these questions reconfigured the institutional logic that governed India-China bilateral engagements outside the disputed border, which is the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh.

The aim is to investigate whether and how the norms, mechanisms, and working assumptions that structured trade, multilateral cooperation, and diplomatic engagement beyond the border were altered following the two crises, evaluating if Galwan marked a shift from a logic of compartmentalization to one of linkage and securitization across domains. Further, the aim is to understand in what ways, if any, did the Galwan incident contribute to the redefinition of sovereignty and territorial integrity as core identity markers in Indo-China diplomatic discourse.

It examines how official statements, policy documents, and elite rhetoric after 2020 elevated sovereignty and territorial integrity from procedural concerns to constitutive elements of India's national identity in relation to China, and how this reframing affected diplomatic language and policy space. This forms the heart of the study, in order to decode Indian diplomacy post-Galwan. Additionally, the study looks at India's perception of China's military capabilities and strategic intentions influenced its assessment of the Chinese threat during the Doklam and Galwan crises. Using Walt's Balance of Threat framework, it compares whether changes in India's threat perception were driven primarily by China's observable actions and capabilities or by changing perceptions of its strategic intent. The analysis of official Indian discourse across both crises helps identify how and why India's threat assessment evolved from Doklam to Galwan.

Finally, it tries to identify the extent to which there was a shift in threat-oriented rhetoric from Doklam to Galwan, and whether this corresponded with changes in the material security environment. Simply put, did the increase in threat-oriented rhetoric between Doklam and Galwan remain consistent with material security conditions such as arms, ammunition and military on ground, or whether the sharper rhetoric after Galwan was primarily a response to the greater military confrontation and escalation, or whether it also reflected a broader shift in how the threat was perceived and politically framed. To understand the history and background of the Galwan crisis and India-China threat perceptions, the following section delves into an extensive review of extant literature to provide relevant context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As growing powers in South Asia, the relations between India and China remain of particular interest in the international arena, given the rich shared cultural and economic history between the two countries. Since the Galwan crisis in 2020, India-China relations have seen a significant downturn. Extant literature traces reasons for this downturn such as the growing closeness of the United States with India (Li, 2023) or posits that bilateral relations between India and China were already declining since their advancement in the 1980s (Gokhale, 2021).

Historical Evolution of India–China Relations and Strategic Rivalry

A brief look at the history of India-China relations shows a graph that advanced slowly upwards, since the decade of tense relations after India's defeat in the 1962 Indo-China War over the disputed Aksai Chin region in the Himalayas. In 1988, then-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited China. This was an unprecedented visit, which was considered the first step towards a positively altered format for bilateral relations between the two countries. However, Sino-Indian relations were on a decline due to increased misperceptions between the nations, contributing to a lack of trust. India and China, as contemporary growing powers, are unable to interpret and decode each other's international ambitions, and with India's growing closeness

to the USA under the present regime; and China's attempt to exert major maritime control, there is an air of pre-emptive hostility because both believe that the other's foreign policy is targeted at the other. Bloomfield (2021), in *The India–China Bilateral Relationship: A 'Serious and Enduring Rivalry'*, examines the India-China relationship through the concept of "serious and enduring rivalry," arguing that competition between the two countries extends beyond occasional border disputes and reflects a long-term strategic rivalry shaped by recurring security concerns, territorial disagreements and competing regional ambitions. According to the paper, the bilateral relationship has changed from episodic conflict to a stable pattern of rivalry due to the ongoing unsolved conflicts, mutual mistrust, and competing geopolitical interests. Taken together, this literature indicates that the Galwan crisis emerged within an already established pattern of territorial disputes, strategic mistrust, competing regional ambitions and recurring confrontations along the LAC. Thus, the deterioration of India-China relations after Galwan can be understood not only as the result of a single military confrontation but also as an escalation within a longer-standing strategic rivalry.

Realism, Power and India's Post-Galwan Strategic Behaviour

The post-Galwan transformation in India's strategic behaviour has been examined by several scholars through the framework of balancing and the changing regional balance of power. Colley and Suhas (2026), in *Theaters of Symmetry: India's Internal Balancing Challenges*, examines how China's expanding military and strategic influence affected India's security strategy following the Galwan Valley conflict in 2020. The authors contend, drawing on the realist viewpoint, that India has been motivated to enhance its own capabilities rather than mainly rely on external partnerships due to the shifting regional balance of power.

Clary (2025), in *Is India Under balancing China?*, examines whether India's response to China's growing military and strategic influence has been sufficient from a realist perspective. The author uses the idea of under balancing to make the case that, despite significant defence reforms and strategic endeavours, India's total reaction is still limited by institutional, political,

and economic constraints at home. Verma (2026), in *India's Evasive Balancing vis-à-vis China Post-Galwan?*, examines if India's long-standing tactic of "evasive balancing" with China has persisted following the conflict in the Galwan Valley in 2020. The paper makes the case that India has greatly increased both its internal and external balancing efforts in response to China's increasing strategic aggressiveness.

Feng and Lei (2026) show that strategic competition has expanded from the Himalayan border into the maritime realm, while Deb (2025) demonstrates a shift towards a broader deterrence-by-punishment strategy involving military, economic and diplomatic instruments. These studies demonstrate that post-Galwan strategic competition is not restricted to the LAC. It has expanded across military, maritime, economic, diplomatic and strategic domains. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that Galwan accelerated changes in India's strategic behaviour and that these changes can be understood through realist explanations of balance-of-power politics.

Strategic Rivalry, Perception and Political Rhetoric

While much of the literature focuses on strategic competition, Chadha (2026), in *India and its China Agenda: Collaboration Amidst Confrontation*, examines the evolving nature of India-China relations by arguing that the relationship cannot be understood solely through the lens of strategic competition. The essay shows that India continues to interact with China in areas where there are shared interests despite border disputes, strategic mistrust, and escalating regional rivalry. Fang (2026), in *An Analysis of China's Strategic Patience in China-India Border Negotiations Since 2020*, uses the idea of strategic patience to analyse China's strategy for border talks with India following the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict. The report contends that China has chosen a long-term negotiating strategy that combines consistent diplomatic engagement with measured military pressure. Together, these studies show that strategic rivalry exists alongside diplomatic engagement, economic participation and selective cooperation.

Although the existing literature provides substantial explanations of India's changing strategic behaviour, a significant part of the literature remains focused on material capabilities, strategic behaviour, balancing, deterrence, military preparedness, diplomatic engagement and geopolitical rivalry. Bloomfield (2021), while providing a theoretical foundation for understanding India-China relations as a serious and enduring rivalry, pays little attention to how official narratives and rhetoric shape perceptions of threat.

Similarly, Colley and Suhas (2026) provide a thorough account of India's internal balancing strategy but pay relatively little attention to how public narratives, elite discourse, and political rhetoric shape India's perception of China as a security threat. Feng and Lei (2026) provide insightful information on how India's balancing strategy has expanded geographically, but they give relatively little consideration to the impact of political rhetoric, elite narratives, and public discourse on India's view of China as a strategic threat. Deb (2025) primarily examines deterrence as a strategic and policy response and acknowledges the use of communication in bolstering deterrence, but pays relatively little consideration to how public narratives, elite discourse, and political rhetoric influence India's view of China as a strategic threat.

Thus, the literature provides substantial explanations of what India and China have done after Galwan, but comparatively less attention is given to how political narratives and strategic perceptions contribute to the interpretation of these actions as threats. The existing studies clarify the material and strategic dimensions of post-Galwan India-China relations, but the connection between material power, political communication, strategic perception, and threat construction remains relatively underexplored.

Synthesis of the Literature and Research Gap

The literature reviewed demonstrates that India-China relations after the Galwan crisis have undergone significant changes across several interconnected dimensions. Historical scholarship establishes that Galwan emerged within a longer-standing strategic rivalry shaped by territorial disputes, mutual mistrust, competing regional ambitions and recurring

confrontations along the LAC. The post-Galwan literature further demonstrates that India has modified its strategic behaviour in response to the changing regional balance of power. Colley and Suhas (2026) emphasise internal balancing and the strengthening of domestic capabilities, while Clary (2025) highlights the institutional, political and economic constraints that produce under-balancing. Verma (2026) demonstrates a movement away from evasive balancing towards a more assertive strategic stance. Feng and Lei (2026) show that strategic competition has expanded from the Himalayan border into the maritime realm, while Deb (2025) demonstrates a shift towards a broader deterrence-by-punishment strategy involving military, economic and diplomatic instruments. However, the literature has largely examined these developments through the lenses of material power, balance of power, deterrence, military preparedness, strategic rivalry, maritime strategy and diplomatic behaviour. Comparatively less attention has been given to how political rhetoric, elite discourse and strategic narratives shape the perception of China as a security threat.

Understanding India-China relations after Galwan requires looking not only at changes in material capabilities but also at how political discourse affects perceptions of danger and strategic decision-making. The relationship between power, political rhetoric and strategic perception is therefore important for understanding how China is constructed as a strategic threat within India's post-Galwan foreign-policy environment. Accordingly, the present study seeks to integrate realist interpretations of power with an examination of political rhetoric and strategic perception to investigate how threat construction in India-China relations following the Galwan crisis has been shaped by the interaction between material power, political discourse and strategic perception. Rather than treating power, rhetoric and perception as separate dimensions, the study examines their interaction in understanding India's post-Galwan approach towards China.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing an extant literature review to aid a thematic discourse analysis of official governmental communications to trace shifts in security threat perception between India and China. Given that the research question concerns rhetoric

and perception rather than measurable material outcomes, a qualitative approach is more appropriate than a quantitative or statistical design. This study identifies the Galwan crisis as its independent variable, and the effect on subsequent security threat perception between India and China as the dependent variable.

Data Collection

This study relies entirely on secondary and publicly available primary source data rather than fieldwork or elite interviews, given practical constraints on direct access to policymakers. Primary data sources include official statements and press releases from India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), official statements and press briefings from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), where available in English translation, Parliamentary debate records (Lok Sabha / Rajya Sabha) concerning India-China relations, public speeches by key officials (e.g. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar) and other openly available sources. These are supplemented by secondary scholarly sources think tank analysis (ORF, IDSA, Carnegie India), peer-reviewed journal articles, and relevant books used to contextualize and cross-verify the interpretation of primary source rhetoric.

Comparative Case Selection: Why Galwan vs Doklam

Before Galwan, the Doklam standoff (June–August 2017) was the closest earlier example of India-China military tension. It works as a baseline to compare against the change in threat perception after Galwan. The crisis began on 8 June 2017, when Chinese (PLA) troops entered the Doklam plateau, a disputed area in western Bhutan near East Sikkim with machinery to build a road connecting the Chumbi Valley to the plateau (Bardalai, 2018). Indian troops from the nearby Sikkim garrison moved in and stopped the construction. This led to a 73-day

standoff, which ended on 28 August when both countries agreed to pull their troops back (Bardalai, 2018; Joshi, 2017). However, the troop withdrawal didn't fully settle things. Satellite images from October 2017 showed China had built up around 3,000 troops opposite Sikkim,

more than had been seen there before and Chinese forces didn't fully leave the Doklam plateau even after the official withdrawal (Bardalai, 2018). Even so, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) kept its public statements calm, saying simply that "the status quo prevails at Doklam", restrained wording, even though Chinese troops were still nearby.

Joshi's (2017) account for ORF adds more detail: the exact border at the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction was genuinely unclear, since old maps disagreed and the original 1890 treaty didn't include a map at all. This gave both sides a real legal argument, which pushed them toward talking rather than fighting. India's official statement on 30 June 2017 referred to a 2012 agreement and asked China "to desist from changing status quo", again, procedural language, not language about sovereignty or threat.

Bardalai (2018) also places the crisis in a longer strategic context: China wants control near the Chumbi Valley partly because it's a narrow area that India could threaten from two sides (Sikkim and Bhutan), a weak point Indian military planners had already noted as far back as 1950. The timing may also matter: the standoff happened right before the Communist Party's 19th National Congress in late 2017, where Xi Jinping's power was formally strengthened, suggesting China's domestic politics played a role too, not just the border dispute itself.

In order to isolate what specifically changed in threat perception after Galwan, this study applies a structured before/after comparison between two India–China border crises: Doklam (2017), the prolonged but non-violent standoff resolved through diplomatic disengagement, and Galwan (2020), the violent clash resulting in fatalities on both sides. Holding geographic proximity and the broader bilateral relationship relatively constant across both cases, this comparison allows the study to isolate rhetoric and perceived intent rather than material power alone as the key variables explaining the shift in threat construction.

Thematic Analysis and Coding of Variables

This study employs thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns in official discourse, informed by Milliken's (1999) framework for the study of discourse in international

relations. The Doklam-Galwan comparison follows George and Bennett's (2005) method of structured, focused comparison, applying a consistent set of coding questions across both cases.

The key point for this study: even with unresolved tension and Chinese troops still nearby, India's public language stayed calm and de-escalatory throughout Doklam. This makes it a useful comparison point for the much sharper, sovereignty-focused language India used after Galwan. Primary source statements from both crises will be systematically coded using a shared thematic framework as seen in Table 1 below:

Category	Description
Date & Source	Origin and timing of the statement
Theme	Territorial sovereignty, border security, national security concern, military preparedness, regional influence, strategic rivalry, or cooperative/procedural language
Tone	Threat-oriented vs. cooperative/procedural
Walt Variable	Which of Walt's <i>Balance of Threat</i> variables the statement primarily reflects (perceived intent, offensive capability, aggregate power)

Table 1: *Thematic Framework for Coding Official Statements from India and China*

Statement Source (2013-2019)	Theme	Tone	Walt Variable
MEA Official	LAC ambiguity;	Cooperative /	Perceived intent

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Spokesperson, ND	diplomatic management	procedural	
Indian Army / Chinese PLA; Depsang, Western Sector	Infrastructure and positional activity as triggers	Cooperative / procedural	Offensive capability
MEA; Chumar and Demchok, Eastern Ladakh	Disengagement; diplomatic resolution	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
Prime Minister Narendra Modi, New Delhi	Constructing threat through perception	Mixed / cautious	Perceived intent
MEA spokesperson, New Delhi	Diplomatic resolution / framing	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
MEA weekly briefing, New Delhi	Rhetoric and legitimacy	Cooperative / procedural	Aggregate power
MEA; Doval–Yang Jiechi meeting	Rhetoric and legitimacy	Cooperative / procedural	Aggregate power
MEA Official Spokesperson, New Delhi	Infrastructure as trigger; threat construction	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent + offensive capability
MEA, Lok Sabha Question No. 1752	Rhetoric and political legitimacy	Threat-oriented / legalistic	Perceived intent

Chinese MFA, Beijing	Competing narratives of trespass	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent + offensive capability
MEA Official Spokesperson, New Delhi	Rhetoric and legitimacy	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
MEA spokesperson Gopal Baglay, New Delhi	Rhetoric and legitimacy	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
MEA weekly briefing, New Delhi	Diplomatic resolution / framing	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
MEA press statement, New Delhi	Diplomatic resolution as political achievement	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
Chinese MFA spokesperson, Beijing	Competing resolution narratives	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent
MEA Official Spokesperson, New Delhi	Diplomatic resolution / framing	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
MEA, Rajya Sabha Question No. 70	Diplomatic resolution / retrospective justification	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
MEA, Rajya Sabha Question No. 2251	Diplomatic resolution / framing	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent

Modi–Xi informal summit, Wuhan	Agreements without assurance	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
Modi–Xi informal summit, Chennai	Agreements without assurance	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent

Table 2: *The sources, themes, tones and ascribed Walt variable of 20 public statements made before, during and after the Doklam Crisis, from 2013 - 2019. It reveals a recurrence of cooperative/procedural tone in statements over others; and that most statements fall under Walt’s “perceived intent” variable.*

Statement Source (2020-2024)	Theme	Tone	Walt variable
MEA Official Spokesperson, New Delhi	Constructing threat through perception	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent
Chinese MFA / PLA Western Theater Command, Beijing	Competing narratives of trespass	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent + offensive capability
Wang Yi–S. Jaishankar telephone readout	Agreements without assurance	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent

Chinese MFA spokesperson, Beijing	Constructing threat through perception	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent
Chinese MFA spokesperson, Beijing	Infrastructure as trigger; competing trespass narratives	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent + offensive capability
Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Lok Sabha	Constructing threat; agreements without assurance	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent + offensive capability
Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Rajya Sabha	Constructing threat through perception	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent + offensive capability
EAM S. Jaishankar, Lowy Institute	Agreements without assurance	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent
Joint press release, ninth Corps Commander meeting	Incremental diplomatic resolution	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Rajya Sabha	Diplomatic resolution as political achievement	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
Jaishankar–Wang Yi meeting readout	Constructing threat through perception	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent

Joint press release, 12th Corps Commander meeting	Incremental diplomatic resolution	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
EAM S. Jaishankar– Wang Yi meeting, New Delhi	Agreements without assurance	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent
EAM S. Jaishankar, Parliament	Constructing threat through perception	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent
EAM S. Jaishankar, G20-related remarks	Agreements without assurance	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent
EAM S. Jaishankar, conversation with Kenneth Juster	Agreements without assurance	Threat-oriented	Perceived intent
Joint press release, 20th Corps Commander meeting	Incremental diplomatic resolution	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
MEA, 21st Corps Commander meeting	Incremental diplomatic resolution	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent
Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and	Diplomatic resolution as political achievement	Cooperative / procedural	Perceived intent

EAM S. Jaishankar, New Delhi			
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Table 3: *The sources, themes, tones and ascribed Walt variable of 20 public statements made before, during and after the Galwan Crisis, from 2020 - 2024. It reveals a recurrence of threat-oriented tone in statements over others; and that most statements fall under Walt's "perceived intent" variable.*

The inventory codes official statements, press releases, parliamentary interventions, ministerial readouts and joint military communiqués. Each separately issued document is treated as one observation. Contested descriptions of events are retained as attributed claims rather than neutral facts. "Tone" refers to the rhetorical register of the statement, identifying whether a statement is cooperative/procedural, threat-oriented or mixed/cautious. "Theme" identifies the substantive communicative function of the statement. Walt variables are coded according to the statement's explicit or strongly implied reference to perceived intent, offensive capability or aggregate power. The inventory is representative rather than exhaustive; the close-reading sample consists of 15-20 statements selected from this broader annex.

Coded data will be analysed to identify patterns in how frequently, and in what proportion, each crisis produced sovereignty/threat-oriented language versus cooperative/procedural language. Frequency counts will be treated as descriptive content-analysis indicators (Krippendorff, 2018) rather than statistically inferential findings. This distribution will then be interpreted through the lens of Walt's Balance of Threat theory to assess whether the shift in rhetoric aligns with a rational realist response to changed material threat (e.g., violence, fatalities, offensive capability), or whether it appears disproportionate to material changes - which would suggest domestic political or constructivist factors are also at work, which is presently beyond the scope of this paper but is worth extending research to.

FINDINGS/ANALYSIS

This section of the study seeks to compare the responses of the Indian government with those of the Chinese government spanning two crises, with statements of threat perception from 2013-2024 analysed to isolate the altering variable that created the change in strategy and security behaviour for both countries. Preliminary findings indicate that due to building trust-erosion between the two countries, and threat-construction using perception of the adversarial state is what led to the shift in amicability to animosity between India and China, as seen in the shift from primarily cooperative to threat-oriented tones in statements.

This distribution will then be interpreted through the lens of Walt's Balance of Threat theory to assess whether the shift in rhetoric aligns with a rational realist response to changed material threat (e.g., violence, fatalities, offensive capability), or whether it appears disproportionate to material changes - which would suggest domestic political or constructivist factors are also at work, which is presently beyond the scope of this paper but is worth extending research to.

Chronological Statement Analysis

After coding statements from both Doklam and Galwan crises, the theme, tone and Walt variables reveal two key trends: first, that out of the combined inventory of statements, there was a significant increase in threat-oriented official, public statements; and second, that there was a significant decrease in the cooperative/procedural official, public statements. Analyzing from the lens of Walt's variables, the key variable that stands out, despite the variation in theme and tone of the statements, is 'perceived intent.'

Using military posturing, complying with or violating treaties and using diplomacy and rhetoric as tools are how states can perceive each other's intentions, and decide whether other states are adversaries or allies. In April 2013, Indian and Chinese border personnel faced off in the Depsang area because of differing perceptions of the LAC alignment. India characterized the episode as a localized incident manageable through existing bilateral agreements and mechanisms, and asked China to maintain the pre-incident status quo.

In May 2013, the Depsang standoff ended after negotiations between local commanders. The settlement reportedly involved reciprocal steps connected with positions and structures in the wider Western Sector. The official framing ensured that it did not combine the Depsang episode with the separate *Chumar* construction issue, thereby using infrastructure and positional activity as triggers for the episode.

In September 2014, India and China disengaged and redeployed border troops in Chumar and Demchok on 26–27 September. A 30 September border-commanders' meeting confirmed that the standoff had ended. Official Indian framing emphasized restoration of the status quo ante and continuation of WMCC dialogue. During Xi Jinping's visit to India in September 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly referred to recurring border incidents, citing the need to clarify and determine the LAC properly. The official statement by the Prime Minister did not count as a deliberate provocation, but rather was a means to construct threat through perception.

By November 2016, India and China had held prior rounds of boundary negotiations, and using the Special Representatives' Mechanism, continued to present boundary management as an ongoing diplomatic process. It was in June 2017 that India stated that Chinese personnel had entered the Doklam area on 16 June to construct a road and that this represented a significant change to the status quo. India linked the alleged construction to Bhutanese concerns and Indian security implications.

In July 2017, India presented a chronology of the Doklam crisis and referred to earlier agreements and understandings governing the boundary question. The government used legal and diplomatic commitments to justify its position before Parliament. By August 2017, India invoked the Astana understanding between Modi and Xi, stated that war was not an answer, and declined to disclose troop numbers. India avoided operational details and maintained its existing diplomatic position, and combined deterrent signalling with an explicit preference for diplomatic management, and towards the end of August 2017, the crisis was framed as

manageable through dialogue. India presented the outcome as a negotiated disengagement rather than an unconditional withdrawal.

In February 2018, India stated that Chinese construction had attempted to alter the status quo and that disengagement had been completed on 28 August 2017. India attributed disengagement to persistent diplomatic communications and stated that the status quo prevailed, and the settlement was framed as the result of sustained diplomacy.

After Doklam in 2017, at the Wuhan Summit in April 2018, both PM Modi and Xi Jinping directed their militaries to improve communication, implement confidence building measures and intensify the settlement efforts. The aim of this language was to rebuild political trust after Doklam, even if they were just agreements without assurance. And two years after Doklam, India and China reiterated the Wuhan understanding, and the principle that differences should not become disputes. Hence, the India-China relationship between 2013 – 2019 was publicly reframed through summit diplomacy.

It was in May 2020, that India rejected Chinese claims that Indian activity had obstructed Chinese patrolling and stated that China was hindering India's normal patrolling pattern. India attempted to frame Chinese activity as an attempt to change the status quo once more, this time through change in patrolling practices. In June 2020, this escalation reached its apex when China alleged that Indian troops crossed the LAC, engaged in illegal activity, and attacked

Chinese personnel; it asserted sovereignty over the Galwan Valley. Here, China framed India as the initiator. Following the crisis, both sides agreed to handle the situation seriously, implement the commander-level understanding, and cool the situation, such that the language of crisis-management did not establish a shared-account of responsibility. China continued to maintain that India had caused the escalation that resulted in loss of life and personnel, and even till the end of June 2020, kept alleging that by crossing first, India violated the 6 June understanding, attacked Chinese personnel, and changed the status quo through road and bridge

construction. Therefore, infrastructural development became the trigger point, which China was able to use to justify military action.

In September 2020, India described Chinese activity from early May onward, stated that the 6 June understanding had been violated on 15 June 2020, and referred to Indian casualties and costs inflicted on Chinese forces. By December 2020, Minister of External Affairs, Jaishankar, described the episode as the most difficult phase in India-China relations in decades. He referred to China's differing explanations for military deployment, emphasizing inconsistency and lack of reassurance in Chinese accounts of the event. In January 2021, both sides held a candid and in-depth exchange and agreed to pursue early disengagement of frontline troops. Hence, military dialogue remained active despite political distrust.

In February 2021, India announced the Pangong Tso Disengagement Agreement and described a phased, coordinated and verified process, presenting it as a concrete diplomatic and military achievement. However, towards the end of February 2021, despite the achievement claim, there were still concerns about provocative behaviour and unilateral attempts to alter the status quo about the LAC from China. It is at this point in time that India began to maintain a focused threat-oriented account, supplemented by ministerial and diplomatic dialogue. By March 2022, MEA Jaishankar stated that the border situation was not normal and linked deployments of troops to violations of earlier agreements, having conditioned the public to a broader normalization of Chinese action along the LAC. In December 2022, Jaishankar once again stated that India would not tolerate attempts to unilaterally change the LAC and described the relationship as abnormal, raising questions and doubts on the wider bilateral relationship between itself and China.

In March 2023, Jaishankar argued that agreements could not be violated while the wider relationship continued as if nothing had happened. India framed compliance with agreements as a precondition for normalization of relations, and the post-Galwan crisis period was represented as continuing structural deterioration of the status quo between Indian and Chinese relations.

In October 2023, both sides held an open and constructive exchange, committed to maintaining peace and tranquility in the interim, while the broader disengagement process remained incomplete. By February 2024, the meeting seeking complete disengagement in remaining areas of the border following the crisis, was still in process. Both sides exchanged perspectives in a friendly and cordial atmosphere and agreed to maintain communication, but there was no way to announce a breakthrough. It was only October 2024, that India and China announced an agreement on patrolling arrangements in Depsang and Demchok, leading to disengagement from the relevant friction points. And while this counted as disengagement, it was limited disengagement, involving patrolling arrangements, and could not be thought of as the resolution of the entire boundary dispute. Despite this, India aimed to present the diplomatic resolution as a political achievement.

Emerging Trends in the Data

Threat-oriented and Cooperative / Procedural Tones

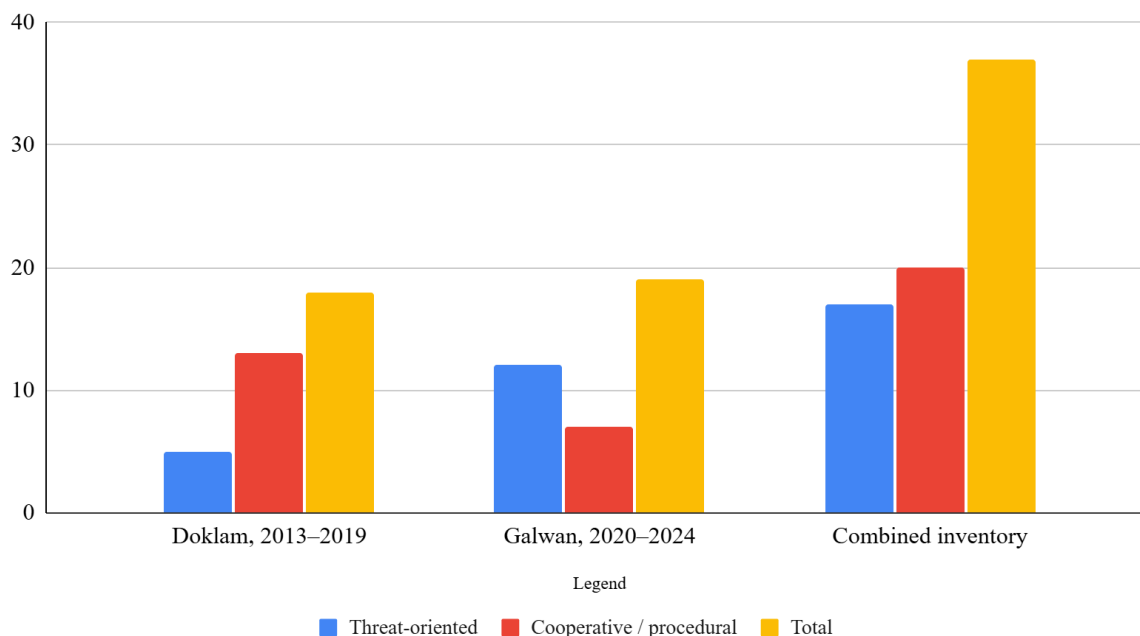


Figure 1: *Trends in Tonal Division of Official Statements; Doklam (2013-2019) and Galwan (2020-2024)*

Across these statements, the narrative that stands out and gets constructed between 2013 - 2019, is a simple one: that while both India and China gave the other reasons to remain dubious, especially when it came to the LAC and construction of roads along the borders, there was also a mutual understanding that engaging cooperatively, following diplomatic procedure and retaining the status quo of mutually beneficial allies in South Asia was the best possible route to take. The dominating Walt variable, giving insight into threat construction, diplomatic resolution, legitimacy through rhetoric and competing narratives is the perceived intent of India towards China. The data indicates that out of the given inventory of 18 official, public statements, 13 were cooperative and procedural in tone. Only 5 were threat-oriented, and that too only at the zenith of the Doklam crises, where tensions were high immediately following the episode. The dip in the 72.20% cooperative/procedural statements came in the wake of the Galwan crisis in 2020, after which, they plummeted to nearly half their original share at a low 36.8%.

The trend changed after 2020, when the Galwan crisis took place. The narrative shifted from India and China wanting mutually cordial relations to shifting accountability of initiating the conflict, using diplomatic resolution as political achievement rather than a peace-making mechanism, asserting claims about the other side wanting to alter the status quo of the LAC and constructing threat through perception. The dominant variable remained perceived intent, but the tone shifted from cooperative/procedural to threat-oriented. To put it simply, India and China both went for the offensive, in trying to take charge of narratives surrounding the Galwan conflict, which was an escalation of already building lack of trust because of infrastructural development around borders.

Post-Galwan period the threat-oriented statements did not stop; rather, Minister of External Affairs, S. Jaishankar's press releases emphasized that trust and normalcy between India and China had eroded significantly, between 2021-2022. The data indicates that out of the given inventory of 19 official, public statements, only 7 were cooperative and procedural in tone. The remaining majority of 12 statements were all threat-oriented, and the number went up from 27.8% during the Doklam crisis to a whopping 63.2%, especially so during the post-Galwan period.

Thematic analysis of variables

Constructing Threat through Perceptions of the Other

In the first theme, the way China and India portrayed each other as the main cause of insecurity is a recurring theme in the statements. Threats were created by conflicting accounts about who had started the conflict and whose activities posed a security risk, in addition to the actual stand-offs occurring along the Line of Actual Control.

The Chinese military build-up and activities around the LAC were described by the Indian viewpoint after Galwan as intentional attempts to upset the status quo. Defense Minister Rajnath Singh mentioned the build-up of Chinese troops and equipment in Eastern Ladakh and detailed measures to disrupt India's established patrolling patterns in a statement to Parliament on September 15, 2020. Following that, the Indian government presented events in Galwan, Gogra, Kongka La, and the Pangong Lake area as interrelated examples of a larger effort to change circumstances along the LAC. As a result, the language turned a single conflict into a larger security issue.

China came up with a different meaning. Beijing said in Zhao Lijian's June 24, 2020, statement that Indian personnel had crossed the LAC, engaged in construction, and broken agreements made between the two parties. As a result, the Chinese narrative portrayed China's military activities as necessary responses to Indian moves and blamed India for upsetting the status quo.

According to a realist viewpoint, states function in situations where it is unclear what other players' intentions are. As a result, changes in patrolling behavior, military movements, and infrastructure development can all become more significant when seen as signs of hostile strategic intent. These divergent narratives are significant because they highlight the difference between intention and action. Both sides tried to explain the other side's actions rather than just describing what happened. Threat creation relies heavily on this attribution of intention.

An important context for this pattern may be seen in the previous Doklam discussions. Chinese statements described the Indian military presence as an illegal intrusion, while Indian statements during the 2017 crisis had previously linked Chinese infrastructure activity to potential security repercussions. As a result, the political discourse surrounding Galwan developed within a preexisting context of conflicting interpretations. Galwan made the attribution of hostile intent far more relevant, intensifying this dynamic.

The Role of Rhetoric in Political Legitimacy

The second theme shows how official speech was used to both explain the situation and validate governmental actions. China and India each claimed that their actions were necessary, defensive, or legal while blaming the other side for escalation.

Indian remarks frequently linked India's activities to the preservation of national security, diplomatic engagement, and established bilateral accords. The 1993 and 1996 agreements as well as other systems governing military behavior along the LAC were mentioned frequently in the September 2020 parliamentary speech. The government presented its actions as in line with established norms rather than as a unilateral escalation by situating India's response within an already-existing institutional and diplomatic framework.

The Chinese narrative used a different kind of legitimacy. China's interpretation of the LAC, prior military accords, and the purported activities of Indian forces were all mentioned several times in Zhao Lijian's remarks. As a result, China justified its military action by claiming that India had violated its rights. Similar rhetorical framing was seen during Doklam in 2017, when Chinese comments depicted Indian forces as illegal intruders and road construction as a legitimate activity within Chinese territory.

This suggests that norms, agreements, and geographical claims were interpreted selectively in order to establish legitimacy. Bilateral agreements did not end conflict; rather, both sides exploited them to support their own narratives. Therefore, conflicting views of accountability

could embrace the same more general notion of upholding peace and honoring established systems. This feature is especially pertinent to how rhetoric functions in realist analysis.

Although material power is heavily emphasized in realism, political narratives that explain state behavior also have an impact on how power is exercised and perceived. In order to maintain its strategic credibility, a state must prove that its actions are justifiable, necessary, and proportionate. As a result, official declarations served as tools for political legitimation on a national and worldwide level. Most notable is the consistent focus on communication and amicable negotiations in addition to strong security rhetoric. India tried to show that it was open to negotiations without being unwilling to stand up for its rights. In a similar vein, China mixed requests for Indian compliance with statements of moderation. Thus, rhetoric evolved from a description of events to a component of strategic behavior.

Agreements without Assurance: The Decline of Confidence along the LAC

In the third theme, another element that emerges from the statements is the increasing significance of bilateral agreements and processes for fostering confidence in order to explain the decline in India-China relations following Galwan. The agreements reached since 1993 to preserve peace and tranquility along the LAC were frequently mentioned in the Indian government's narrative. Despite the lack of a mutually agreed boundary, these agreements set expectations for troop deployment, military behavior, and face-off management.

The assertion that mutual cooperation was necessary for these agreements to be effective gives them significance in the Galwan story. The Chinese military build-up and subsequent actions, according to India's September 2020 parliamentary declaration, were at odds with earlier pledges made by both parties. Therefore, the violent clash at Galwan was portrayed as a threat to the structure that had governed border contacts for several decades, rather than just a breakdown of physical peace.

China presented the problem in a different way in its statements, accusing India of acting in a way that went against earlier agreements and of breaking agreements reached through commander-level discussions. As a result, the Chinese narrative similarly exploited the

language of agreements and established procedures, but it did so in order to assign blame to India. This highlights a significant paradox in the post-Galwan security landscape.

Formal competition management systems persisted, but mutual trust in them declined. The underlying dispute over territorial claims could not be independently resolved by agreements, nor could they stop each party from viewing the other's activities through an increasingly hostile prism. From a realist standpoint, the breakdown of standards that foster confidence is very important. Although agreements and institutions can control state behavior, their efficacy ultimately hinges on states' willingness to abide by them and their evaluation of whether doing so suits their security interests. Previously stabilizing processes may itself become causes of suspicion once one side starts to suspect that the other is utilizing existing arrangements to obtain a strategic advantage.

Thus, the Galwan crisis led to a change in the interpretation of bilateral agreements. Rather than serving mainly as tools for self-assurance and moderation, they started to play a role in the political debate as each side used them to highlight the other's purported noncompliance. This undermined the legitimacy of current systems and strengthened the belief that increased military readiness, strategic caution, and vigilance were necessary to ensure security.

When combined, these themes show how changes along the LAC, as well as how China and India perceived and conveyed those developments, influenced the post-Galwan security environment. While official rhetoric was employed to create legitimacy and assign responsibility, the opposing narratives portrayed the other side as a source of threat. Simultaneously, a deeper degradation of trust was evidenced by the increasing dependence on bilateral agreements and the waning confidence in their efficacy. The border dispute became a threat creation following Galwan, which resulted from the interaction of material power, strategic signalling, and conflicting perceptions of intent.

Infrastructure and Construction as Triggers for Altering the Status Quo

The fourth theme is a central theme that emerges across both Doklam and Galwan is how the infrastructure development and construction were both presented not as routine activities but

as attempts to alter the status quo. In both the incidents, it was not the construction or the development which created a conflict, but the sudden patrol clash triggered it.

In Doklam, the entry of the Chinese construction party to build a road on 16 June 2017, which is recorded in the MEA Press Release of 30 June 2017 and Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 1752 dated 26 July 2017 was more of a change of status quo with serious implications to Indian security, linking it to the Siliguri corridor.

The same documents also noted that the Royal Government of Bhutan had also protested against this as a violation of 1988 and 1998 agreements between China and Bhutan, and through this the conflict came to involve a third state as well. A similar pattern is visible in Galwan as well. The Indian side, in its press releases, argued that China had attempted to construct tents, structures, and observation towers. The Chinese side argued that since April 2020 the Indian side had been building bridges and roads across the LAC in the Galwan valley. Thus, both the states used the same logic - construction is equal to threat.

This theme is important from the realist perspective because it shows how actions on the ground frame the strategic intent. Infrastructure became a tool for creating facts on the ground, and so the threat does not come from mere construction but the fact that once troops start to align and if they are able to sustain themselves there, it will become a threat to both nations regardless if the LAC has been officially drawn or not. Both Doklam and Galwan show that infrastructure is no longer a background factor but the central trigger for security dilemmas along the LAC.

Competing Narratives of Trespass and the Question of Who Crossed First

The fifth theme is that both nations have been able to provide competing data around trespass, where each side provides dates, numbers, and consensus violations to argue that the other crossed first. The crisis is not just about territory but also about who crossed it first.

In Doklam, the Chinese MFA Position Paper of 2 August 2017 provides a detailed numerical account, claiming that on 18 June, over 270 Indian border troops crossed into Chinese territory in Sikkim sector to obstruct lawful construction and that number later increased to 400. This

was termed as ‘illegal trespass’ and was coupled with a demand for immediate withdrawal. The Indian MEA statement of 30 June 2017 rejected this entirely and mentioned that India was acting in coordination with Bhutan, and was asking China not to change the status quo.

Similarly, the Galwan crisis replicated the situation. There was a three-point statement by Zhao Lijian for India, India replied that it had acted proportionally, suggesting that it was China that disturbed the already established practices.

What is important is that both crises become unsolvable. Realism explains this as a problem of uncertainty - when the intent is unclear and there is no specific demarcation, all actions, regardless of anything will be interpreted as offensive. Here, both sides use extensive amounts of evidence, numbers and agreements to legitimize their own presence and render others unlawful. Thus, how the whole incident unfolded and the way the nations dealt with it becomes more political.

Diplomatic Resolution and the Framing of Disengagement as Political Victory

For the final theme, both sides used diplomatic resolution and the framing of disengagement as a political victory. In Doklam, the resolution announced on 28 August 2017, by the MEA was presented as a quick disengagement which was agreed to by both sides. The Chinese MFA, on the other hand, on the same day mentioned that India had withdrawn all its personnel and equipment that were illegally on the Chinese territory, while their own troops would continue the patrolling in the Dong Lang area, projecting it as an action solely taken by India where it withdraws all its personnel and equipment.

In Galwan, on the other hand, this phenomenon is absent. The Indian side noted, before the crisis had ensued, that both sides were disengaging and everything was under control. After the clash, a similar MEA statement was released emphasizing that there was peace in Galwan and that the Astana consensus between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi was also recalled. At the same time, the Defence Minister, as reported by Indian Express, said that while the government did not want escalation, the forces were free to give a ‘befitting reply.’

Later, there were military movements in the region by both the nations, and therefore there was a long-term military standoff here, unlike the Doklam crisis. From a realist lean, this is essential. The Doklam crisis shows that even under high tensions, through talks and diplomatic channels escalations could be handled. On the other hand, it can be observed from the Galwan crisis situation that misinterpretation or selective interpretation of agreements like those of 1993 and 1996, and declining trust, disengagement does not aid in de-escalation neither becomes a proper military step, but a political act.

DISCUSSION

The aforementioned mentioned themes were analysed to find that India and China had each constructed threat. Whether this was through bilateral agreements, or official statements; they were used selectively, and carefully and were framed in ways that supported their own position. This created a shift in rhetoric that was used to further this divide. Material conditions such as construction of roads along key strategic locations along the LAC, by both India and China were perceived by their counterpart as an attempt to alter the status quo, and disrupt the present balance between the two. All these observations are common to Doklam (2017) and Galwan (2020). Thus far, Walt's Balance of Threat theory holds true across the lens of aggressive intentions. Whether or not India and China had *actual* aggressive intentions gets undermined by the unilateral interpretation of intentions, creating fertile ground for more aggressive foreign policy towards the other.

A key difference between Doklam and Galwan was the resolution: where Doklam was resolved through a series of diplomatic talks, Galwan saw a prolonged military stand-off along with diplomatic talks. During Doklam, both India and China were able to project confidence and victory, with the outcome framed as a success. However, due to military engagement in Galwan, the confidence-building measures between India and China had broken down, leading to a major loss in credibility between the two states. Hence, a low-trust situation became a no-trust situation, and confidence-building measures such as diplomatic talks, summits and bilateral agreements saw a severe weakening in their ability to restore trust. Because of the

narratives posited to their own side by India and China, it altered the way India came to perceive China as a threat.

By analysing official statements, press releases, ORF reports and so on, this study offers a foundation for comprehending why crises like Galwan are not isolated events, but rather incendiary turning points which indicate an escalation within a pre-established rivalry, and how they can lead to a major shift in security and power rhetorics, away from the established trends. The official rhetoric was used to create legitimacy and ascribe responsibility, whereas opposing narratives showed that the other side was an increasing source of threat. Simultaneously, trust was degraded further between states and the confidence in their efficacy, which was evidenced by a sudden dependence on more bilateral agreements within a shorter time span than previously observed.

Authors have previously discussed, drawing from realism, that India's motivation to enhance its own capabilities exist because of its intent to withdraw from relying heavily on external partnerships. In light of the shifting regional balance of power between India and China post-2020, it may explain why India would not want to depend on external capacities, especially for military preparedness, defense infrastructure, long-term strategic planning and technological modernization. These are central tenets to Indian national security, and since this study establishes the role of rhetoric in altering security narratives, any moves to reduce strategic vulnerabilities only strengthen India's position regionally.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to examine the shift in India-China relations after the Galwan crisis through a realist lens by focusing on how threat perception, rhetoric, and material capabilities interact to construct bilateral hostility outside the immediate border zone. The Doklam standoff of 2017 and the Galwan clash of 2020 were used as critical junctures and comparative cases to analyze institutional and ideational change. After the Galwan crisis, the accelerated changes in India's foreign and national security policy with respect to China was best understood by realist explanations of balance of power politics.

The norms, mechanisms and working assumptions between the two Asian behemoths which provided the framework for trade, multilateral cooperation and diplomatic engagement beyond borders were changed significantly following both Doklam and Galwan, such that China estimation of Indian securitization capacity fell short, and India's foreign policy towards China saw major swing towards the hardline.

Part of the threat perception between India and China relied on fears of altering sovereignty and territorial integrity: if either Indian or Chinese troops were able to align themselves along the undetermined boundary of the LAC and sustain themselves there, there would be virtually nothing stopping either country into trespassing borders. Given India and China's decades long battles along borders for territory, the real, material threat that construction and setting up infrastructure of any kind posed was unacceptable to both states. Hence, both Doklam and Galwan saw infrastructure as a central trigger for security dilemmas, and not background factors for why escalations occurred along the Line of Actual Control the way they did.

Materiality aside, a strength of realist analysis is understanding how political narratives can explain state behaviour, and how power is exercised, perceived and tackled. For both India and China to retain credibility following the breakdown of credence of bilateral agreements along LAC due to the military standoff and casualties, both states had to use official statements to repair that lacunae. Official declarations, and competing narratives with each other served as tools for political legitimation, whilst also signalling strength regionally and globally. By blaming the intrusion on India, China was able to justify why its soldiers engaged in combat. Similarly, by ascribing blame to China for setting up a security tower in Indian territory, India was able to justify the proportionality and necessity of why Indian troops engaged their Chinese counterparts.

Finally, the realist viewpoint is able to identify hostile strategic intent in a situation where changes such as altered patrolling behaviour, movement of armaments and equipment and infrastructural development may seem benign and isolated events. However, when states have unclear intentions towards each other, it can create a feedback loop of hostility. India and China had remained fairly ambivalent and cooperative towards each other outside of border conflicts.

However, this ambivalence vanished in wake of multiple security crises along the borders, and with sudden increase in bilateral agreements, when trust vanished, diverging narratives appeared.

For Galwan, neither side was interested in describing the conflict as it had occurred. Official statements on both sides were interested in playing the blame-game, creating a further disambiguous hostility towards each other which has led to a harsher security policy by India towards China. Where Doklam was proof that conversations through diplomatic channels even under high-pressure situations can be de-escalated, Galwan was proof that it is not necessary to just use diplomatic channels. Signalling via materiality and selective interpretation of agreements like the 1993 and 1996 can only lead to declining trust. Hence, disengagement does not necessarily aid de-escalation, and instead turns into an act of political face-saving rather than supplementing long-term security and peace policy.

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