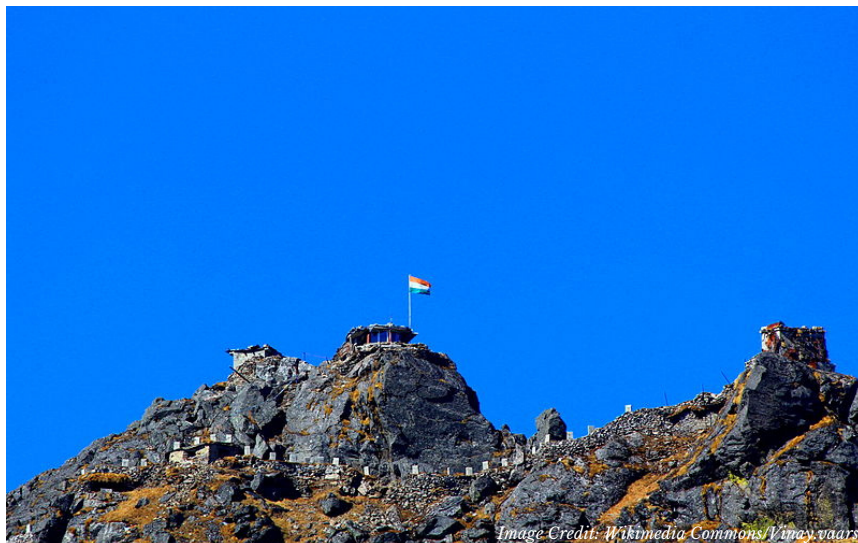


# China-India Brief

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## Guest Column

## India's Infrastructure Development and Stability on the Border with China

By Neeraj Singh Manhas

India's relationship with China has become increasingly tumultuous. The **violent clash** in the Galwan Valley along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in May 2020 as well as the more recent **incident** between Indian and Chinese troops at the Tawang sector in early December 2022 have only served to highlight the continued danger and unpredictability of the border situation. Moreover, despite the multiple commander-level discussions following the Galwan Valley clash, the border tensions remain. India is prepared for military escalation at the LAC, and infrastructure development will play a crucial role in strengthening its capacity to respond.

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The *China-India Brief* is a bi-monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia's two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

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## Recent Military and Diplomatic Developments

The latest clash between Indian and Chinese troops occurred on the morning of December 9, 2022, in the Yangtse area of the Tawang region along the LAC. According to one **report**, around 200 Chinese soldiers crossed the border and tried to overwhelm one of the Indian outposts which was manned by 40-50 soldiers. The attack failed when the Indian position was quickly reinforced by a larger group of Indian soldiers, forcing the Chinese back over the border.

In the air, Chinese fighter jets have also been known to repeatedly trespass into Indian airspace, in violation of a 1996 **agreement** which prohibits combat aircraft from flying within 10 kilometres of the LAC. The violations were so severe that a **special round of talks** was held on August 2, 2022 to discuss airspace management and measures to avoid airspace infractions. The talks appear to have had little effect. In December 2022, it was **reported** that the Indian air force had scrambled fighters multiple times in response to Chinese drones flying close to the LAC. To keep an eye on the actions of the Chinese air force in Ladakh, India plans to increase air defence coverage in the region over the next few years by putting **radars** worth Rs. 10,000 crores along the LAC.

In an address to the Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies, External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar **emphasised** once again the Indian view that “maintenance of peace and tranquillity in the border areas” remain the foundation for normal relations between India and China. He noted that the “**new normals of posture**” will inevitably lead to “**new normals of responses.**” In addition, he **stated** that Sino-Indian relations must be founded on three mutuals: mutual sensitivity, mutual respect, and mutual interest. The Indian view is clearly that formal diplomacy is deadlocked.

## Infrastructure Development of India and China

In contrast, the military situation is dynamic, partly as a function of continuing infrastructure development on both sides. In October 2022, India formally inaugurated **seventy-five infrastructure projects** along the LAC, including bridges, roads, and helipads, likely in response to China’s own ongoing military build-up along the border. These roadways and helipads are regarded as essential for the rapid deployment and mobilisation of Indian soldiers along the LAC. The same month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi **addressed** a gathering in Mana, the last village in India before the border with China. He underlined the significance of villages and settlements in the border region, saying that “every village at the border is the first village of the country.”





India is **upgrading** its military posture against China's military and infrastructure development along the LAC. The Indian army has a multi-pronged approach to enhancing its capabilities by introducing new systems and technologies, as well as massive infrastructure development. The army has focused on improving its operational effectiveness in the Ladakh theatre and has promoted infrastructural development in the eastern sector, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh. The anticipated infrastructure push includes the construction of roads, bridges, helipads, military housing, ammunition storage places, and other logistical facilities to support forward deployments.

For instance, India has begun **construction** of the Atal Tunnel close to Ladakh along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in order to improve the movement of its armed forces during the harsh winter months. In addition, India has begun construction on **nine** rail lines that will run from Missamari, Tenga, and Tawang to Bilaspur, Mandi, Manali, and Leh, all of which are located next to the LAC.

Yet, major gaps in India's border infrastructure remain. In the Tawang sector where the latest clash occurred, India has established several outposts that occupy the commanding heights overlooking the area. However, the only way to keep these outposts supplied is via steep **dirt roads** which are in poor condition due to shoddy construction and environmental erosion. Indeed, despite their seemingly strong positions, a **report** by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) noted that these Indian outposts were vulnerable to being cut off and isolated.

Infrastructure development has also been **expanding** on the Chinese side. Particularly after Indian troops acquired possession of numerous crucial peaks on the southern bank of Pangong Lake in August 2020, China's border infrastructure development has been accelerating. There are **reports** of construction work by the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) near Hadigara-Delta in Chaglagam, as well as the building of an administrative post in the Anjaw district of Arunachal Pradesh close to the LAC.

The PLA has **constructed** at least eight roads leading to the LAC from the G219 expressway in China. A report published **stated** that these run from the saline water lake Tianshuihai in the Xinjiang area to the Galwan Valley, and from Kangxiwar in the southwestern Xinjiang province of China to the Karakoram Pass, respectively. Along these lateral roads, north-south connecting roads have also been developed. As seen by **satellite images**, China is constructing a second bridge across the Pangong Tso to facilitate the movement of PLA soldiers and weapons and ammunition between the northern and southern lakeshores.

Notably, around Tawang, although Chinese forces occupy relatively weak positions compared to the Indians, they have invested more heavily in infrastructure, upgrading and establishing several important access roads. In particular, it was the completion of a **road** connecting Tangwu New Village to within 150 metres of the LAC that facilitated the movement of Chinese forces towards Indian positions on December 9.

Beijing has also created several residential **“villages”** near the LAC. In November 2021, it was **reported** that China was constructing at least sixty buildings in Arunachal Pradesh, 6 kilometres inside territory claimed by India.

## Why is it Important for India?

India has **focused** on building roads and other important infrastructure along the LAC over the past five years to improve its military preparedness. The new infrastructure will provide India with an additional entry point from which it can rapidly mobilise and send soldiers to forward places along the LAC when necessary. In addition, the new construction will facilitate more efficient logistics management for troops already stationed along the LAC.

It is also India's concern that China will have direct road access to locations opposite significant Indian military stations along the LAC in Ladakh, from Daulat Beg Oldi in the north to Galwan Valley, Pangong Tso, and Chumar in the south. During the most **recent** Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination of India-China Border Affairs conference on October 14, 2022, India conveyed to Beijing its concerns regarding infrastructure expansion.

## Conclusion

Over the two decades, India has placed a high priority on developing and maintaining a robust border infrastructure. Several infrastructure projects in the border province of Arunachal Pradesh have picked up pace and have been seen as a concerted effort to strengthen the war preparedness of the armed forces given that China contests Indian claims in Arunachal Pradesh. Road infrastructure projects in Arunachal Pradesh are also frequently **portrayed** by the Indian government as priorities for rapidly bridging a huge developmental and connectivity gap for the various tribes that inhabit Arunachal Pradesh.

As both India and China accelerate efforts to develop their respective border infrastructure, it will become increasingly possible to rapidly move and deploy soldiers along the LAC, making it easier for small border incidents to escalate. Therefore, the infrastructure along state borders not only serves an economic purpose but also drives the strategic security agenda of governments. In order to reduce the likelihood of conflict, both China and India must continue to strictly uphold past agreements and CBMs designed to prevent escalation.

Neeraj Singh Manhas is the Director of Research in the Indo-Pacific Consortium at Raisina House, New Delhi. He has authored three books and has various research interests covering Sino-Indian border issues, China in the Indian Ocean; India-China Foreign Policy; Water security; Defence and Indo-Pacific studies. His recent edited book is *Analysing the Current Afghan Context* (Routledge 2022). His writings have appeared in the *Institute for Security & Development Policy (ISDP)*, *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*, *The Hindu Business Line*, *The Pioneer*, *Financial Express*, and other online platforms. He tweets at **@The\_China\_Chap**