

Opinion – The Galwan Valley Standoff Could Spell the End of South-South Romance

Written by Abdou Rahim Lema

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ABDOU RAHIM LEMA, JUL 26 2020

The expanding geographic outreach of South-South Cooperation (SSC) in recent years has become a vector of hope in developing countries' efforts to achieve development and prosperity. But the recent border clash between India and China, the world's most populous nations and two of the most important engines of SSC, could prove a real test to SSC's principles of peaceful coexistence, mutual benefit, and third-world solidarity. In other words, not only does the ongoing rift between the two leading voices of the South-South momentum make a mockery of the two countries' professed commitment to the cause of the disadvantaged of the international system, but it also threatens the Global South's 'historic mission' of promoting a fairer and equal world. The China-India standoff at the Galwan Valley along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayas on June 15 is the deadliest clash between the two nuclear powers in more than 40 years. It also brings tensions between the two countries to their highest point in decades. And while their relations might have always been delicate and oscillating between cooperation and competition, recent developments could prove particularly worrisome for the future of SSC.

The history of SSC is often traced back to 1955, when representatives from 29 Asian and African countries gathered at a conference in Bandung, Indonesia, to not only further economic and technical cooperation among developing countries, but also to allow the downtrodden of the post-1945 global order to join forces against a West-dominated world order. As such, the Bandung conference marked a formalized turning point of Global South solidarity, with attempts to rebuild the international order to provide Southern countries equality of participation in international arenas that had regularly failed to ensure their inclusion.

It was also an opportunity for the newly independent countries to vent their frustrations over the traditional realpolitik of the day. Since then, however, SSC has evolved to become an integral and major part of the international development landscape. A case in point was the adoption of the Buenos Aires Plan of Action (BAPA) in 1978 to promote and implement technical and development cooperation among developing countries. In addition to driving forth much of the euphoria about its potential, this has also helped make SSC a buzz word in development parlance. The spectacular rise of the likes of China has undeniably played a significant role in that process.

Nonetheless, China's rise also saw a shift in its diplomatic and foreign policy undertakings. As it emerges from a traditionally defensive diplomatic posture, Beijing is now increasingly perceived as a bold, assertive player fueling its 'great power' muscles by projecting its military might, playing the national security card to secure its interests in its immediate vicinity and far beyond. This has especially been the case under the leadership of Xi Jinping, who has repeatedly made it known that China now aspires to be a shaper of global trends. It goes without saying that Beijing's new foreign policy posture is seen with skepticism as it is strongly reminiscent of a premature hegemonic supremacy that is spelling the end to China's 'charm offensive'. The assertive turn of China's foreign policy, coupled with the increasingly nationalistic posture of Narendra Modi's India, meant that the resurgence of the Sino-Indian border disputes is not entirely intriguing. If Xi is emboldened by his increasingly embattled 'China Dream', Modi seems invigorated by his version of 'India first', resulting in heightened risk of a military confrontation between the two nuclear-armed powers.

The standoff and the ensuing breakdown in their relations will have far-reaching consequences for SSC in the

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foreseeable future, given that the growing rift in New Delhi-Beijing relations is likely to cripple not just their broader engagement but also their respective cooperation with other developing countries. In a widely publicized move yet antithetical to SSC aspirations, India launched a 'digital strike' against China, blocking 59 Chinese apps on June 29, including the widely popular Tik Tok (with about 611 million downloads of the app made in the country, India is TikTok's largest market, according to Sensor Tower). Though New Delhi claims the ban serves to protect India's 'sovereignty and security', it is widely believed to be an economic retribution for the June 15 border clash. Indeed, cross border trade and investment will also suffer, with reports emerging that Modi's government is cancelling a major railway contract won by a Chinese firm and considering banning the Chinese telecommunications equipment giant Huawei from its 5G network. There has also been a widespread movement to boycott Chinese products. Beyond these bilateral setbacks, however, the rift is also certain to play out in their multilateral engagement with the likes of BRICS and the UN Security Council, which India will soon join as nonpermanent member for the 2021-22 term.

Although the reported withdrawal of Chinese troops from the border area where the standoff took place and the ongoing bilateral talks could help cool the cross-border tensions, they are unlikely to undo the long-term damage and the simmering mutual distrust. Indeed, the strategic mistrust in Sino-Indian relations is likely to become a given, which might have an irredeemable long-term impact on their bilateral as well as multilateral cooperation. It might also deal a major blow to their ability to drive SSC forward in the face of a deadly global pandemic and the melting global economy that is set to hit the developing world the hardest. Clearly, an open and violent conflict between the leading powers of the developing countries does not bode well for the future of SSC and will likely make an irreparable dent in the Global South's quest to transform the institutions of global governance and make the world a fairer and more equal place. Achieving these ambitious and oft-romanticized goals is mainly dependent on genuine partnership and synergetic cooperation among all parties concerned. This in turn also depends not only on a strong concerted voice from the Global South, but also on the added weight of major southern players such as China and India working together. If anything, the fraught relations between China and India cast a major doubt on such endeavors, while also threatening to end the discursive romance surrounding SSC in much of development space.

While the Galwan Valley standoff continues to underline the fragility of the 1962 agreement between India and China, following the war over their competing claims to the arid border region in the Himalayas, it also brings to light the underlying challenges to the much-touted solidarity of the Global South. As both countries continue their path to becoming 'great' nations and indispensable actors on regional and global affairs, the June incident is unlikely to go down as an aberration; rather it might be a harbinger of increasing fraught relations ahead. It could, therefore, be a critical inflection point between the two neighbors, signaling a rocky and treacherous phase of Sino-Indian relations, characterized by strategic mistrust and plenty of animosity. This might well dash the aspirations of the Global South for a better and more comprehensive SSC and put the developing world in a deep predicament for years to come.

About the author:

Abdou Rahim Lema is a Yenching Scholar of Peking University, where he completed a Master's Degree in China Studies, focusing on Politics and International Relations. His research work focuses on South-South Cooperation, Triangular Cooperation, and the growing Sino-African security and development relations.