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India-China Border

Tactics, Talks and Transgressions

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Takshashila Position Paper 2023-02
[Version 1.0, March, 2023]

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Recommended Citation:

Anushka Saxena and Amit Kumar, *“India-China Border: Tactics, Talks and Transgressions,”* Takshashila Position Paper 2023-02, March 2023, The Takshashila Institution.

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Track Changes¹

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| Version 1.0 | Published Thursday, 9 March 2023 | |
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¹ This position paper shall be updated as and when events and ideas shape up with new trends and developments.

Key Judgements²

- Chinese aggression along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) since April 2020, resulting in an ensuing military standoff with India, has fundamentally transformed bilateral relations, by undermining any ‘mutual trust’ built across years of diplomatic effort since the conclusion of the 1993 Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement.
- People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s) objectives behind assertion along the LAC extend beyond mere territorial claims. Using sustained military pressure under a certain threshold, the PRC is seeking to coerce Indian policymakers into strategic acquiescence, as it seeks to craft a unipolar Asian order. Consequently, tensions and volatility along the LAC is likely to persist for the foreseeable future.
- New Delhi, therefore, must not view the situation along the LAC within a limited context and must adopt a diverse set of actions to respond to the strategic gambit along the LAC. These include deployments that signal that India is ready for longer and drawn-out tensions along the LAC, pursuit of asymmetric countermeasures such as electronic and information warfare, development of maritime power, and partnering with countervailing coalitions against China.
- Finally, India’s defence spending must account for these requirements. On this front, Delhi must focus much more on capital outlays and combat capability enhancement. A 44 per cent increase in operational spending and a 57 per cent increase in the capital outlay for modernization and infrastructure development in the FY 2022-23 budget point to positive trends in this regard.³

² **Acknowledgement: The authors would like to thank their colleague, Manoj Kewalramani, for his valuable feedback and comments.**

³ Pranay Kotasthane, A gradual approach on defence spending, *Hindustan Times*, 14 February 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/a-gradual-approach-on-defence-spending-101676298678102.html>.

Section 1: Recent Developments along the LAC

- In January 2020, the Chinese PLA was conducting military exercises in Tibet. The exercises included heavy deployment of helicopters, artillery, and anti-aircraft missiles.
- In April 2020, as the annual spring exercises concluded, the 4th and 6th Highland Mechanized Infantry Divisions under the Xinjiang Military Division, instead of returning back to their posts, started moving⁴ west toward the LAC.
- Following this, intelligence inputs indicated increased PLA activity in the Eastern Ladakh sector of the LAC, including the movement of troops and heavy vehicular traffic. A violent clash was also reported⁵ to have occurred in the Pangong Tso area on May 5 and 6, 2020.
- Caught off-guard, Indian forces soon found that access to key Patrolling Points (PPs) in Galwan, Pangong Tso, Gogra-Hot Springs, Depsang, and Demchok-Charding Nala had been blocked by the PLA. These have since constituted major points of friction between the two sides in the region.
- Due to Chinese blockage of the PPs and differences in perception of the border, because of which Chinese claimed India trespassed into their territory, a series of Corps-Commander level talks were initiated on 6 June, 2020.
- It was during the negotiations, verifications and withdrawal process, that the skirmishes took place in Galwan Valley on 15 June 2023. This was also the first time since 1975 when Indian soldiers (20) lost their lives (with 5 casualties reported on the Chinese side).
- Since early June, India and China have conducted 17 rounds of Corps Commander-level (CCL) talks, the most recent one held in the Chushul-Moldo border site on the Chinese side on 20 December 2022.
- These talks have led to disengagement⁶ on both sides from five friction points along the LAC - Gogra-Hotsprings area (PP-15, September 2022 & PP-17A, August 2021), Galwan Valley (PP-14, June 2020), and North and South banks of Pangong Tso lake-Kailash Range Region (February 2021).

⁴ Nitin Gokhale, "Eastern Ladakh: Chinese Formations Undertaking Rotation, Bharat Shakti, 27 April 2021, <https://bharatshakti.in/eastern-ladakh-chinese-formations-undertaking-rotation/>.

⁵ Abhishek Bhalla, "Buildup of Chinese troops in Ladakh not spontaneous, movement began in mid-April," India Today, 5 June 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/buildup-of-chinese-troops-in-ladakh-not-spontaneous-movement-began-in-mid-april-1685990-2020-06-05>.

⁶ As per Deepak Kumar of the Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses, "In military parlance, the term 'disengagement' can be defined as withdrawal from a stated military policy, military involvement, or at the tactical level, a military position... The term military 'de-escalation' relates to the spectrum of conflict. A conflict can

- The issues surrounding the blockade of India’s patrolling rights in Depsang and Demchok were brought up for discussion at the 17th CCL talks but the Chinese have refused to discuss them currently.

Section 1.A: Contemporary trends in India-China border issue

- The border conflict with China is both a strategic issue of national interest and security, and a charged electoral issue for the Indian populace.
- Since 2010, India has witnessed an intensification of border “transgressions” by the Chinese PLA, even though the Indian government has reported no “infiltrations”⁷ (between 2018-2021) or “intrusions”^{8,9}
- In all, the 1600+ border transgressions¹⁰ that took place between 2010 and 2014 were accredited to differences in the perceptions of LAC. The number remained the same in the four-year period from 2016 to 2019.
- Some of these have led to serious standoffs. For instance, the one at Depsang (Ladakh - 30 km south of Daulat Beg Oldi; April 2013), Demchok and Chumar (Ladakh - September 2014), Doklam (Bhutan/ Chumbi Valley - June-August 2017), Galwan (Ladakh – June 2020), and Tawang, Yangtse (Arunachal Pradesh - December 2022).

range from the lowest pre-crisis stage and diplomatic actions to military posturing to non-conventional war to limited war and further to a full blown out conventional war, and at the farthest end of the spectrum, the nuclear war. Military de-escalation refers to moving from a higher spectrum to a lower spectrum of conflict.”

⁷ Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 1538, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 7 December 2021, <http://164.100.24.220/loksabhaquestions/annex/177/AU1538.pdf>.

⁸ Bharti Jain, “No Chinese intrusion since 2010, only ‘transgressions’: Govt,” Times of India, 20 August 2014, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/no-chinese-intrusion-since-2010-only-transgressions-govt/articleshow/40457901.cms>.

⁹ As per Deepak Kumar of the Manohar Parrikar Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses, intrusion “means the movement of a unit or force or a military asset inside another nation’s specified operational area or territorial seas or territorial airspace for surveillance or intelligence gathering in times of peace, no war-no peace, or war. A characteristic feature of intrusion is that it is temporary in time and space and has to be vacated (or evicted).” Infiltration is “A technique of tactical movement by small forces over land, air, or water through an area or territory occupied by friendly forces or an enemy, or in the close vicinity of enemy positions. The movement is made at extended or irregular intervals.” Transgression is “when a military body of troops goes into the other side of the border assuming that it is their own territory due to the difference in the perception of the border itself.” As per Mihir Bhonsale for ORE, the Indian government, since 2010, has preferred to call Chinese movement along the LAC ‘Transgression’, denying that there have been any ‘Intrusions’.

¹⁰ Ibid.

- According to a Research Paper¹¹ submitted at the Annual Police Conference in Delhi on 26 January 2023, after the 2020 standoff in Eastern Ladakh “**there are 65 PPs starting from Karakoram pass to Chumur which are to be patrolled regularly by the ISFs (Indian Security Forces).**” *The paper added: “Out of 65 PPs, our presence is lost in 26 PPs (i.e. PP no. 5-17, 24-32, 37, 51,52,62) due to restrictive or no patrolling by the ISFs [Indian Security Forces].”*
- That same paper also argues¹² that “India has lost access to almost half of the patrolling points (PP) on the border with China in eastern Ladakh while the Army is adopting a “**play safe” strategy not to annoy their Chinese counterparts** is turning once accessible areas into informal buffer zones and thus losing control.”
- On the other hand, India has also ramped up efforts to expand capabilities on the border, such as by planning¹³ to induct 9,400 border personnel in the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, bringing 47 new border outposts under construction in addition to the 129 already existing, investing in the development of border infrastructure and border villages, and enhancing battle-readiness by deploying¹⁴ cruise missiles, howitzers, US-made Chinook transport choppers and drones built in Israel.
- Additionally, India has also pulled out around 35,000 troops¹⁵ from counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations and has redirected them to Eastern Ladakh - these include one division of the Rashtriya Rifles and an Assam-based division of the Gajaraj Corps.

¹¹ Vijaita Singh and Dinakar Peri, “India has lost access to 26 out of 65 Patrolling Points in eastern Ladakh, says research paper,” *The Hindu*, 26 January 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-has-lost-access-to-26-out-of-65-patrolling-points-in-eastern-ladakh-says-research-paper/article66428193.ece>.

¹² Shemin Joy, “India playing 'safe' on China border: Paper at DGP meet,” *Deccan Herald*, 25 January 2023, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/india-playing-safe-on-china-border-paper-at-dgp-meet-1184619.html>.

¹³ Eye on China (18 February 2023), <https://eyeonchina.substack.com/p/eye-on-china-18-february-2023>.

¹⁴ “India ramps up Himalayan border security after clashes with China,” *Al Jazeera*, 3 November 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/3/india-china-himalayan-border-security-deadly-clashes>.

¹⁵ ANI, “From Ladakh to Northeast, 6 Indian Army Divisions shifted from Pak front, anti-terrorist roles to tackle China threat,” *The Print*, 15 May 2020, <https://theprint.in/india/from-ladakh-to-northeast-6-indian-army-divisions-shifted-from-pak-front-anti-terrorist-roles-to-tackle-china-threat/957068/>.

Section 1.B: Positions of the Two Sides

- The understanding of the border issue on the Chinese side, as reiterated¹⁶ by Wang Yi, Director of the Chinese Foreign Affairs Commission during his visit to India in March 2021, is that “The boundary dispute, an issue left from history, is not the whole story of the China-India relationship.”
- Chinese analysts also point out¹⁷ that while the border issue itself is “instrumentalized,”¹⁸ there are other fundamental differences between India and China that make cooperation toward resolving the border issue difficult.
- These include India’s increasing convergence with the US on defence and technology policy, as well as Indo-Pacific strategy, India’s acceptance of US supremacy in the world order, competition between India and China for dominance in the neighbourhood, and a rise of Hindu Nationalism within the country.
- India’s position, reiterated¹⁹ by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, is that, “We have maintained our position that if China disturbs the peace and tranquillity in the border areas, it will impact our relations. Our relationship is not normal, it cannot be normal as the border situation is not normal.”

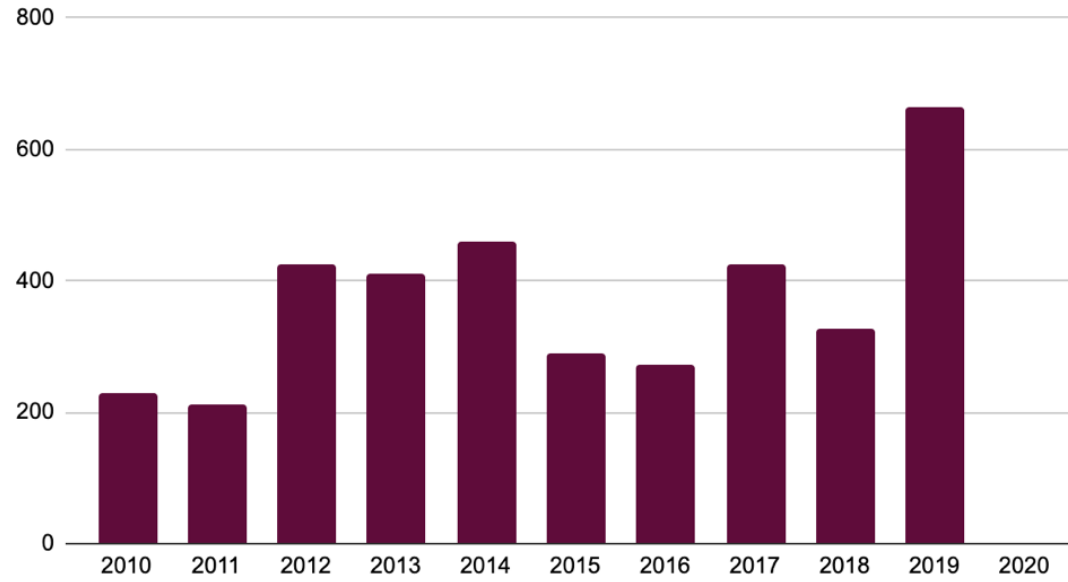
¹⁶ “Excerpt of Press Conference by State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi on March 7, 2021,” Consulate-general of the People’s Republic of China in Mumbai, 9 March 2021, http://mumbai.china-consulate.gov.cn/eng/zxhd/202103/t20210309_10010392.htm.

¹⁷ Thomas des Garets Geddes, “India’s Growing Antagonism Towards China as Viewed by SIIS Analyst Liu Zongyi,” Sinification, 16 January 2023, <https://sinification.substack.com/p/indias-growing-antagonism-towards>.

¹⁸ Here, the term ‘instrumentalized’ indicates that in the Chinese perception, India is using tensions and disagreements along the border as an instrument to put pressure on China to concede its legitimate demands, while also securing Indian economic and military interests in the region. Analysts such as Liu Zongyi argue that India uses this as a tool to cooperate with the US to contain China, when actually, the border situation isn’t an issue of concern at all and need not be used as a geostrategic instrument.

¹⁹ ANI, “India-China relation can’t be normal unless...’: Jaishankar on border issue,” *Hindustan Times*, 13 August 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/indiachina-relation-can-t-be-normal-unless-jaishankar-on-border-issue-101660362937123.html>.

Number of Chinese Transgressions across the LAC by Year



Index

| | |
|------|---------|
| 2010 | 228 |
| 2011 | 213 |
| 2012 | 426 |
| 2013 | 411 |
| 2014 | 460 |
| 2015 | 290 |
| 2016 | 273 |
| 2017 | 426 |
| 2018 | 326 |
| 2019 | 663 |
| 2020 | No data |

Section 2: Intersection of LAC issue with Economic and Multilateral Relations

- In tandem with India's position on the LAC issue, the government has undertaken economic countermeasures.²⁰ For example, Indian agencies have launched anti-money laundering investigations against Chinese companies like Vivo, Oppo and Xiaomi. The government is also cracking down on "predatory investments" from China. In April 2020, the government issued a notification requiring that FDI from neighbouring countries, including China, only be cleared following approval. This has stalled several Chinese investment proposals. In addition, decisions have been taken to keep Chinese telecom companies out of India's 5G ecosystem, and hundreds of Chinese apps have been blocked in India citing national security concerns.
- In addition, as part of its *Atmanirbharta* campaign, India is now looking to leverage²¹ its Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes to reduce dependence on Chinese imports. These include²² critical sectors such as pharma, auto components and automobiles, solar modules, and white goods.
- Despite this emphasis on reducing its dependence on China, India's trade with China has expanded manifold,²³ with an 8.4 per cent increase y-o-y (from US\$125.6 billion in 2021-22 to US\$135.98 billion in 2022-23). Also, for the first time this year, India's trade deficit against China breached the US\$100 billion mark. Moreover, as of 2022, 70 per cent²⁴ of India's pharma sector requirements, including critical Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) are still being delivered by China.
- On the multilateral front, India's withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has cut it off from a significant opportunity to share rules of economic cooperation in the region, while allowing China to gain strategic leverage over it.
- India is also leveraging its relationship with the quad countries and reaching out to other actors in the Indo-Pacific region to build a rules-based order and provide public goods as a means to counter Beijing's growing influence in the region.

²⁰ Tushar Gupta, "The Story Of India's Economic Pushback Against China," Swarajya Magazine, 14 July 2022, <https://swarajyamag.com/world/the-story-of-indias-economic-pushback-against-china>.

²¹ Eye on China (11 February 2023), <https://eyeonchina.substack.com/p/eye-on-china-11-february-2023>.

²² "Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Schemes in India," Invest India, <https://www.investindia.gov.in/production-linked-incentives-schemes-india>.

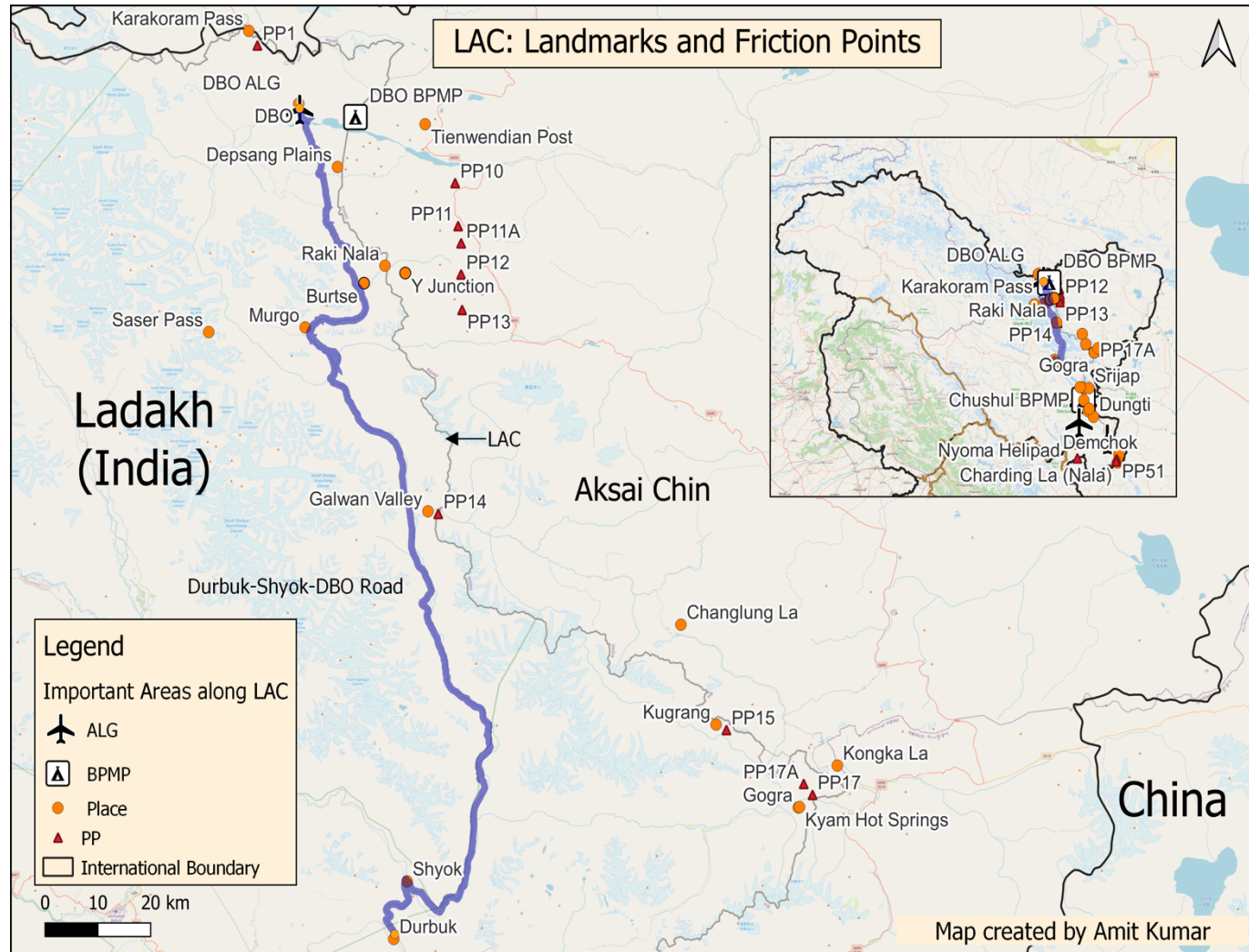
²³ "Despite Frosty Relations, India's Trade With China Reaches Record Levels," *The Wire*, 13 January 2023, <https://thewire.in/trade/india-china-trade-deficit-2022-imports-exports>.

²⁴ Sushmita Panda, "70-80% of APIs are imported from China; We are working towards filling this gap: Dr. Sanjay Chaturvedi, CEO, IOL Chemicals and Pharmaceuticals," *Financial Express*, 15 October 2022, <https://www.financialexpress.com/healthcare/pharma-healthcare/70-80-of-the-apis-are-imported-from-china-we-are-working-towards-changing-this-sanjay-chaturvedi-ceo-iol-chemicals-and-pharmaceuticals/2713038/#:~:text=India%20is%20heavily%20dependent%20on,APIs%20are%20imported%20from%20China>.

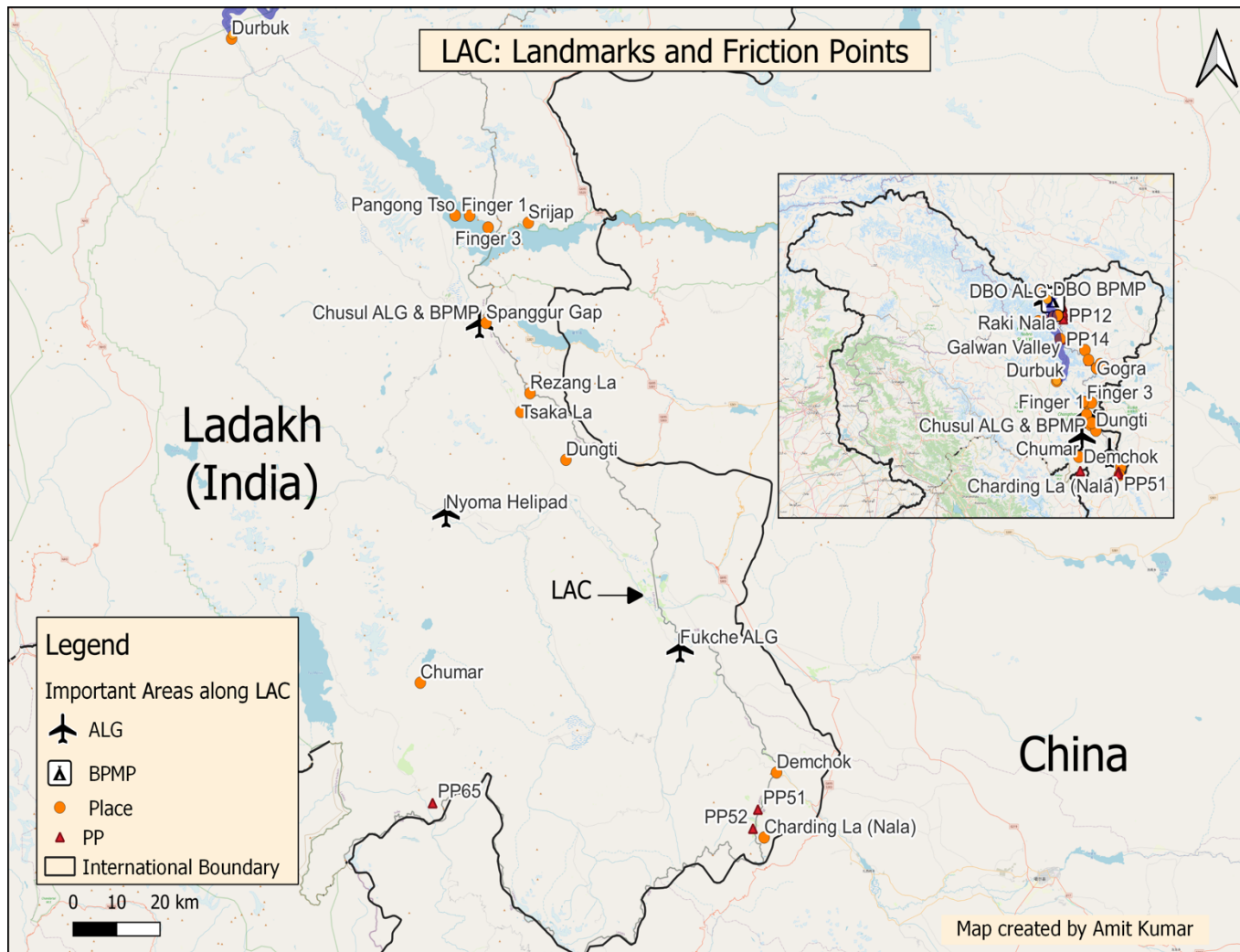
Section 3: Way Forward

- On the military front, Indian forces and policymakers should be prepared for the long haul in Eastern Ladakh. India must not fall under the pressure of time and accept an unfavourable settlement or new status quo in Eastern Ladakh.
- Continued investment in border infrastructure is essential, as is enhanced defence spending allocation on improving overall combat capabilities.
- New Delhi should remain open to Corps-Commander level and ministerial- and leader-level negotiations with the aim of attaining complete disengagement and return to pre-April 2020 status quo, along with the restoration of Indian patrolling rights in Demchok and Depsang.
- Indian economic policy in the context of the strategic challenge from China must not emphasize decoupling. Instead of worrying about trade dependencies and substituting imports, India must look to address critical vulnerabilities and build resilience.
- India also has an opportunity to utilize the openings that the US-China competition brings. India should leverage its relations and converging interests with the US to pressure China. Some of our recommendations in this regard include:
 - Expanding the Indo-US defence partnership, especially in technology transfers, intelligence-sharing, and naval interoperability across the Indo-Pacific;
 - Collaborating with the US in supply chain resilience across critical and emerging technologies, through initiatives such as the iCET;
 - Delivering on Quad-based commitments such as the Indo-Pacific Maritime Domain Awareness project, and the Quad Cyber Challenge; and
 - Seeking US support on the global stage for promotion of shared values and on selective issues concerning Indian economic and military security.

Annex



Map 1: Western Sector of the LAC/ Ladakh (Top)



Map 2: Western Sector of the LAC/ Ladakh (Bottom)



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