

Research Article

Why did China's Assertive Strategy on the Himalayan Border?

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Abstract

The development of differing perceptions of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has been one of the constant factors leading to the protracted dispute in the Himalayan border. Since the outbreak of war in 1962, recriminations and clashes between military forces have continued along the 3,488 km disputed area. Since 1980 both parties have continued to make efforts to resolve disputes with a fair and acceptable solution. Unfortunately, the initiations of these peace efforts have always been deadlocked. At first, in responding to India, China preferred to be passive. However, recently China has begun to respond with an assertive behavior. The deployment of army troops, military equipment, covert attacks, and massive infrastructure development was carried out by China in strategic Himalayan border. This study explores the changing of China's assertive strategy in the Himalayas by employing offensive realism and using qualitative approach. This study has found that the changing behavior of China's is related protecting its national interests and territorial sovereignty as well as a form of affirming the stability of China's dominance in the region. This study's results will provide an overview that there has been a shift in China's strategy for managing its border conflict with India.

Keywords: Dispute, Border, Foreign Policy, Assertiveness, Military.

INTRODUCTION

Diplomatic relations between China and India began in 1949 when India recognized China as a communist country. However, this relationship started to face challenges when India was included in a list of countries whose conflict border with China has not resolved affairs. In a nutshell, this conflict came in the undemarcated border Line of Actual Control (LAC), which separates the territory controlled by India and China (Kumar, 1963). Zhou Enlai first used the term LAC in his annual letter to Jawaharlal Nehru. As time went by, the meaning was developed to refer to the formed line after war in 1962. The disputed area is divided into three major sectors. First, the Eastern Sector covers Arunachal Pradesh. The middle sector covers the regions of Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Sikkim. Whereas western sector covers the Ladakh region Xinjiang (Xuecheng, 2011). The ambiguity of the LAC has triggered turmoil that resulted in hostility between India and China (Sukman, 2017).

Tensions of the dispute began to arise in 1954 when China claimed the Barahoti area and protested the Indian troops. The dispute in the Barahoti region continued until 1956, expanding China's claims to Tun Jun La and Hup Seng Khud (Ahmed, 1955). In 1962, the peak of conflict, sparked by the actions of Chinese troops crossing the McMahon Line and seizing mountain trails as well as cities. At that time, China was also building a road across Aksai Chin in Indian-claimed territory. The war was marked as the peak of this dispute for one month. More than 1,000 Indians were victims and 3,000 Indians were taken as prisoners. On the other hand, nearly 800 Chinese military troops died. Shortly after the war broke out, Premier Zhou Enlai of China declared a ceasefire, unofficially withdrawn the closest border to the Chinese armies after had conquered territory (Goldman, 2020).

Tensions came to a head again in 1967, Nathu La and Cho La's mountainous route that connected Sikkim, was under India's protection, and the Tibetan autonomous region in China. The tension escalated as Indian troops installed barbed wire along the border. The clashes occurred when Chinese military units fired artillery shells into India. In this conflict, India won by destroying the Chinese fort at Nathu La successfully. The year of 1980, became a meeting point for a shift direction as a treaty settlement and was more representative for both parties. China and India agreed to negotiate according to clear political lines and principles to find justice and an acceptable solution. China accepted India's offer to resolve the dispute in stages on a sector-by-sector basis. During this period, the two countries' military forces were still seen actively conducting surveillance and training in the disputed areas (Chauduri, 2020).

From 1998 until 2003, a Joint Working Group was conducted between state delegations to design instruments to assist the Line of Actual Control (LAC) area's stability. In April 2005, an agreement was signed which regulates political parameters and basic principles of border dispute resolution. This agreement also emphasizes the commitment to implement the 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Calm along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the India-China Border Territory and the 1996 Agreement on Measurement to Build Confidence in Military Fields along the Line of Actual Control (Singh, 2011).

Since this agreement was formed, China-India diplomatic relations have gradually improved. However, several agreements reached by the two countries as a deliberate resolution guideline have not been effective. Disputes in the border area continue to occur, with the two countries still firm in their respective principles. The Dooklam Standoff incident on August 28, 2017, became a momentum to mark the impasse of diplomatic efforts on border disputes by the two countries. This incident began with the resistance of the Indian army over the entry of Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops in the Dooklam border area to build roads in the region. Protests were not only fulfilled by India but also Bhutan, a country that has territorial rights over Dooklam. The situation was getting worse when the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a map depicting Dooklam as part of China's sovereignty. Military intervention worsened the dispute this year. They were threatening each other until an army clash between the two countries in the border area (Ratha, 2020).

In 2020, tensions between Indian and Chinese military forces returned. This time's escalation was caused when China sent thousands of troops to the targeted area, which is the LAC route. During the confrontation, an Indian commander was pushed and fell into a river canyon. This prompted hundreds of troops from the two sides to encounter a battle. At least this clash managed to kill 20 troops. To date, no official boundaries have been negotiated. The two countries continue to strive to assign their ambitions for the region. In 2020, tensions between Indian and Chinese military forces were back. This time's escalation was caused when China sent thousands of troops to the targeted area, namely the LAC route. During the confrontation, an Indian commander was pushed and fell into a river canyon. This then prompted hundreds of troops from the two sides to do battle. At least this clash managed to kill 20 troops. To date, no official boundaries have been negotiated. The two countries continue to strive to establish their ambitions for the region (Davidson, 2020). For China, the South Asian region is essential, although its area lacks a major geopolitical priority in some literature. The geographical location of South Asia, which is very strategic, followed by population growth and the issue of nuclear and terrorism, has caused this region to require a large allocation of attention. China considers the security stability of the South Asian region as valuable for its security, especially to maintain its economic development ambitions and prevent other external and domestic threats from crossing borders (Freeman, 2018). South Asia is a critical area in which Beijing aims to revise the political and security order of Eurasia and become an Asian power. Not to mention the fact that the United States has also made South Asia a key area in Washington's goal to build a free and open Indo-Pacific has prompted a period of strategic competition between China and America (Adhikari, 2014).

Some of the facts above are the driving factors for China's ambitions in the South Asian region. Recently, China has become one of the parties in the public spotlight because of its actions and approaches. Some researchers have become more assertive, especially since the transfer of power under Xi Jinping. Since being elected Secretary-General of the Chinese Communist Party at the end of 2012 and then becoming president in early 2013, Xi has made many breakthroughs in China's foreign policy. Starting from the events of 2017-2020, China's militarization strategy is more intense to be enacted. China is actively sending thousands of troops to guard and conduct training in the border region. Some researchers considered this to be closely related to the leadership principles adopted by Xi Jinping. Xi has a strong notion about the military. Xi's idea is often described as "a set of guiding principles for building a new type of people's army that dares to fight and win wars" (建设"敢, "). Xi's persistence with the military sector is also supported by the fact that the Chinese Communist Party invests a large amount of budget and political capital to build a "world-class military" by 2050 (Duchâtel, 2021).

Besides, China is also strengthening its strategy through infrastructure development. Chinese government documents even report that China intends to build 624 border villages in the disputed Himalayan region. The perception was then widespread in the environment. Some groups considered that Xi was implementing the same strategy as the previous leader or assuming that Xi's plans in the Himalayas were almost the same with the South China Sea settlement. However, people do not think that the current

approach is more assertive. Even though it creates a paradox in the international environment, especially over the treatment of military forces against India, China still makes militarization the central axis to defend its claim in the Himalayan border region Himalaya (The Times of India, 2021).

Recently, Xi Jinping has become one of the figures who has become the international community's talk. This is due to his bold leadership style and Xi's way of reversing the direction of China's foreign policy, which is becoming open and assertive on the global stage. Therefore, many academics have tried to explore Xi Jinping's foreign policy potion. One of them is an article by Cabestan, In his research, Cabestan explained that Xi had shown a strategic transformation in China's foreign policy. The strategy Xi introduced stands in stark contrast to the mandate of the previous Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping. Cabestan explained that China's foreign policy could be more proactive, assertive, and aggressive. Xi called for being more active in the international environment and creating a mutually beneficial atmosphere of cooperation, particular with developing countries. This is evidenced by the ambition of China's participation in global governance such as the UN, BRICS, APEC, and the G20 agenda (Cabestan, 2021).

However, it seems that Cabestan's writing does not fully describe Xi Jinping's era's foreign policy. Instead of building a mutually beneficial and global order, what is happening now is that China is increasingly aggressive and courageous. This statement was proven through the research by Chang-Lio, Chang-Lio explained that new courage had been found in China's foreign policy. This policy has recombined the well-known historical views of China and demonstrated even more significant transformation. Chang-Lio also mentioned the escalation of tensions with Chinese partners in Asia. This is because the Chinese government has placed a much stronger emphasis on the priority of securing China's borders. China assumes maintaining a stable environment as a core element of foreign policy in the Xi Jinping era. China believes that a regular region will allow China to focus on its domestic resources in a solid economic foundation (Nien-chung Chang-Liao, 2016).

As talked about China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping's leadership, several academics said that the evidence of China's current foreign policy's courage and assertiveness could be seen from the military position is still the central axis. This statement is then supported by research written by Michael D. Swaine, Swaine explores the notion of a "more assertive" Chinese stance concerning the existence of the Chinese military or the People Liberation Army / PLA. Swaine observed some of China's actions in deploying and maintaining several ballistic missiles across Taiwan, surveilling the US military along China's maritime periphery, testing new weapons, and deploying troops to safeguard regional claims. It can be concluded that this courage was present because of the PLA's position increasingly influential in China's political system. However, the PLA, which is declared very conservative and nationalist, is not the only interested group behind China's current foreign policy-making (Swaine, 2012).

Although the conflict on the Himalayan border is not new in international negotiations, this issue is still interesting to study. In practice, China has always seemed

ambitious to defend its territorial claims. Joshi, in his writing said that China's tough stance on efforts to resolve border disputes with India is one of the factors in the failure of any negotiation efforts undertaken. Joshi shows the reality of the collapse in 2005 agreement due to both parties' severe claims. China has seen it easy to spend billions of US dollars to increase surveillance at its borders. Under Xi's leadership, China was more ambitious to fight back and strengthen its position in the Himalayan border region. Hundreds of military troops were deployed, Xi Jinping even prepared an infrastructure development strategy to reinforce claims (Joshi, 2011).

From some of the studies above, it can be seen that there have been significant dynamics in the direction of China's foreign policy. The research also touches on the factors that influence China's increasingly assertive policies in the global sphere, including guarding territories and border areas. In the case of border disputes in the Himalayan region, one of the articles alludes to China's aggressive approach, which is the cause of the failure of negotiations. Therefore, the author will analyze why China has implemented an aggressive policy in dealing with India in the Himalayan region through the following research. The following article will be formulated using an offensive realist approach.

METHOD AND THEORY

In this study, qualitative research methods will be used. Qualitative research aims to describe and analyze phenomena, events, dynamics, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of something from written or oral data and observable actors. Through several descriptions, the aim is to find an explanation that will lead to a conclusion. In researching why China's assertive strategy on the Himalayan Border? The data collection technique used is to conduct a literature study. Through this technique, research data is obtained through literature in books, academic journals, online bulletins, and articles on the internet that can be accounted for academically. The research will begin by compiling basic assumptions and thinking rules from existing data to be interpreted and used in research.

In order to answer the research question, the realist perspective has a significant role in providing a comprehensive explanation of the international system in practice. Realism considers that a sovereign state is an important and most influential actor in the global environment. The normative basis of realism is national security and state survival. This is what drives the doctrine and foreign policy of the realists. Realists have three main distinctive points. First, Self-Help considers that no one can be trusted except their own country, so whatever other countries do is considered a threat. Thereby, the state must always be vigilant and enhance the military as a defense. Second, Survival considers that the country will do anything if it takes to survive in a lawless environment of International Relations (no single country is strong and can regulate another country). And the last one is Statism, where the state is the sole actor in achieving national goals. The state will do whatever it takes to achieve these goals. The roles of individuals, NGOs, IGOs are not considered. "Leave all to your country and you will prosper"(Jackson, R. H; Sorensen, 2007).

Realism has two views to explain a country's power: Defensive realism and Offensive realism. Defensive realism states that the state's function is to defend, not to attack, in maximizing power. Defensive realism believes that if the shape maximizes power too much, it will impact the creation of an alliance to match the power of a country. Meanwhile, Offensive Realism argues that the military is not only for defense but also for attacking to maximize capacity as long as there is an opportunity even if its army is minimal. Therefore, they have to continue to optimize power because that is the only way to defend the country (J.J, 2001).

In the context of offensive realism, the state tends to confront or conflict for its own sake and maximize power. The state is considered appropriate to behave in this way to survive in the international system. The foremost expert on offensive realism, Mearsheimer further outlines five basic assumptions: (1) the global system is anarchic. Anarchy, referred to in this case, leads to a lack of hierarchy or the absence of a central authority that the state can turn to for help in an emergency; (2) offensive Realism emphasizes that the great powers are the leading players in international politics, and each of them has an offensive military capacity. In this case, Mearsheimer also suggests that there is a potential for a country to be dangerous to other countries; (3) the state can never ascertain the intentions of other countries; (4) the main goal of the state is survival. In this case, survival is much more important than any other motive; (5) the state is a rational actor, where the state thinks strategically and acts intentionally in the best interest. Mearsheimer then summarizes these five basic assumptions into three general patterns: fear, self-help, and maximizing power; and (6) power is a tool to ensure survival.

In recent times, China, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, has adopted an assertive approach to defending its many claims, including the case in the Himalayan Region. In social psychology, assertiveness usually reflects an attitude of defending personal rights and expressing thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a direct, honest, and appropriate way that does not violate the rights of others. In international relations, assertiveness can be seen as a definite and straightforward way to defend the rights or claims of a state (Doshi, 2019). In the following research, the author will employ the realism framework, particularly offensive realism, to analyze why China maintains an assertive strategy or approach towards India in dealing with the Himalayan border conflict. In short, through this approach, it can be assumed that China's assertive attitude towards India on the Himalayan border can be seen from the indications of an increasingly massive military contribution in policy patterns and motivation for self-defense, in this case, regional sovereignty. In addition, this is also related to maintaining China's dominance in the Himalayan region or even regionally. Under Xi's leadership, it can be seen that China is getting serious about deploying its military might to regain its historical position against countries in the region. In one report, the Foreign Affairs article argues that China's assertiveness in several cases, including the violent confrontation with India in 2020, directly results from President Xi's view of China's role in the world. China is also known to formulate new laws as a ploy to turn border disputes into sovereign conflicts. Therefore, China predicts various opportunities to maintain or increase its claims' dominance in the

Himalayan region by deploying military power with aggressive infrastructure development ambitions.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

China's strategy in dealing with India on the Himalayan border

The border dispute along with the 3,488 km Line of Actual Control (LAC) area is the most complicated history between China and India. Disputes in the three sectors of the region have sparked much political turmoil and fighting in recent decades. Treaties from the British colonial era in South Asia are at the heart of this dispute. India believes that it inherited a firm border from Britain, while China considers the border issue unresolved. When the People's Republic of China took power in 1949, it abandoned all previous foreign treaties as unequal treaties imposed on it during a century of humiliation, demanding the renegotiation of all its borders. Over the past few years, both China and India have quickly sought to resolve the dispute in several negotiations and agreements. Unfortunately, the talks always end in a dead-end and fail (Thakker, 2020).

Several previous studies agree that China and India border disputes were often marginalized in China's foreign policy priority scale in the past. This was because, at that time, the focus of China's foreign policy was still very closely related to significant powers such as the United States and countries off its eastern coast. Even at that time, the fundamental interests of China's leaders were still struggling to consolidate their power in order to pursue an agenda to improve China's position in the international sphere. However, the above situation began to change in Mao's 1962 leadership year. Mao reevaluated his approach in viewing the Sino-Indian border dispute by adopting a more escalation policy. Mao's initial policy was India's confrontational Forward policy. Mao decided that coercive action was needed to pull India's leader out of complacency. The escalation policy starts from a light level through armed coexistence. Under the policy, Mao instructed Chinese border troops to continue patrols within the 20-kilometer buffer zone. Patrol forces were directed to counter Indian positions and build fire posts if they received orders from the central to take attacks. During Mao's reign in 1965, China made a highway in the disputed Aksai Chin region to connect Tibet with Xinjiang (Westcott, 2019).

Jiang Zemin followed Mao's approach to the China-India border dispute. During Jiang's time, the policy embodied the development of Joint Working Group negotiations and various trust-building measures. Jiang makes the status quo approach a priority in his best interests. The China-India border dispute was still a significant issue when the leadership changed to Hu Jintao. China's foreign policy started to adopt a cooperative approach. Hu seeks to stabilize China-India bilateral relations by trying out several new diplomatic initiatives to revitalize border negotiations. Hu designed some small concessions and good gestures towards India. Another minor settlement was made in the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles of the 2005 Treaty, signed during Premier Wen's visit. China explicitly agreed to "safeguard the interests of the resident population." At that time, the China-India border dispute under Hu's leadership was marked by an

increase in the intensity of the round of formal border negotiations. In April 2013, China had attacked in the LAC area. A PLA paramilitary unit put up an administrative tent 19 kilo meters in the disputed area (Konwer, 2011).

Unfortunately, the initiation of the negotiation round during Hu's leadership did not immediately resolve the border issue. Both China and India are still fighting to maintain their claims and power in the 3 Himalayan sectors. China's approach and strategy towards the region continued until the leadership of Xi Jinping. In the early period of his administration, Xi was very active in reversing China's growing governance norms. Xi seeks to develop his ideological innovations, which are essential in an aspirational struggle for the 'China Dream' concept. Xi's vision of a rejuvenated China saw him deviate from the conservative foreign policies of Deng, Jiang, and Hu. It takes a more assertive and proactive role in international affairs. This proactive grand strategy is designed to address a range of domestic and international security issues Xi has identified as a threat to China.

Xi specifically said that sovereignty, security, and development interests must be protected in the international environment. Meanwhile, issues of political security and social stability must be maintained in the domestic sphere. In the China-India border dispute, Xi adopted a policy of status quo that manifested his leadership as a continuation of negotiations with India without making significant demands or offering territorial concessions. In addition, Xi was also adopting an escalation policy. Since late 2013, PLA units have been massively patrolling the border area. Not a few analysts think that these patrols are indirectly deployed to give pressure on India (Jacob, 2021).

Theoretically, it is argued that to push China's ambitions of global domination in responding to the border issue, Xi has notably refrained and chosen to be a bit cautious in taking risk of utilizing the military. Unfortunately, this is the opposite of what is happening in the field. At the end of 2014, India and China had clashed in the Demchok area. China is known for trying to change the situation on the ground by demanding a halt to construct an Indian canal that China considers crossing borders. In 2015, clashes broke out between Chinese PLA troops and Indian troops in the Burtse region. This happened when Indian troops were found to destroyed a Chinese-built surveillance tower in the patrol lane (Chauduri, 2020).

Slow yet sure, China's assertive attitude in the disputed area began to be seen through the assertiveness of the PLA troops towards border claims. This year, the PLA committed military reforms and established the Western Theater Command to expand its mission scope and combat readiness. Thus, it can be seen that China employed a military approach as the primary strategy to deal with India in the Himalayas. This provides an implication for the number of violations that increased in 2017. This year was also seen as the beginning of the crisis when the Indian Army blocked the construction of a road by China in Doklam. India took this action based on the interpretation of the Bhutan-India Friendship Agreement, which was agreed in 2007. India considers the road construction project by China to be able to change the status quo which has security implications. China responded by stating that India's actions violated international law (Karackattu, 2020). Furthermore, China is known to be involved in military shows in the Eastern sector,

particularly Arunachal Pradesh and Tawang. At that time, China responded to India's actions by conducting patrols with jets very assertively. China's response was realized by launching two Sukhoi-27 jets. China also launched two unarmed aircraft to carry out security and neutralization of the region. This year China reaffirmed its position by showing its level in the military field. In addition to naval training, China also deployed a fleet of battleships and a military parade that deployed 12,000 combat-ready troops and 600 military equipment to 100 advanced aircraft (Lidarev, 2018).

In 2020, tensions between China and India are getting higher. This time the center of the conflict escalation occurs in the western sector. The exchange of accusations between the two sides occurred as Beijing again opposed New Delhi's efforts to strengthen infrastructure in the border area. Despite having been forced to withdraw, China still insists on patrolling the border. The fighting culminated when the Indian commander was pushed off a ridge by Chinese troops. The battle was executed using stone, iron, and other emergency weapons. China has yet to confirm how many PLA soldiers died, but at least 20 Indians were killed. Reports from satellite images show that there may be 1,000 PLA troops.

It is known that the PLA army has three border defence centres based in the disputed area (Aksai Chin). The first two were taken from the 362nd Frontier Regiment (32160部队) and located at Khurnak Fort (库尔那克堡) in the northern shore of Pangong Lake and Spanggur Lake (斯潘古尔) in the southern. The third was located at Kongka Pass (空喀山口) close by the Indian outpost at Gogra/Hot Springs and belonged to the 363rd Frontier Regiment (69316部队). There was a squadron of patrol boats (山顶上的国门舰队) on Pangong Lake itself. The PLA troops also mobilized additional conventional combat troops from the 6th Mechanized Division. The Chinese forces were even indicated to be equipped with artillery. Indian media also reported that the deployment of Chinese forces had spread between 1,200 to 1,500 personnel around the LAC. Another 5,000 troops were diverted to other areas to support patrols. From the description above, it can be seen that China is aggressively using a military approach to achieve its control goals in the Himalayan region (Boyd, 2018).

In order to reinforce the military strategy, China is known for designing discourse on infrastructure development in the Himalayan region. The ambition of the infrastructure aspect dates back to 1950, when China built roads in the Himalayan region. At that time, China needed highways and railways to solidify and consolidate control over Tibetan territory. China's leader, Mao, ordered the PLA to build roads linking Xinjiang, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunan with Tibet. In recent years, the construction of these roads and railways have spread to various parts of India, even Nepal and Bhutan. The railway lines built were interconnected between areas in the border (Wu, 2020).

As one of the steps to secure the claimed territory, China is very ambitious in continuing the construction of the road. In the next period, China is known to conduct the development of strategic areas in the Dooklam plateau. The PLA uses the road to narrow access to the Chicken Neck strategic area in the Siliguri corridor. The Siliguri Corridor is the center of the rail and highway network that connects West Bengal to the rest of India,

including Eastern regions such as Assam, Nagaland, and Sikkim. This corridor also connects the rail network to all military formations along the LAC. According to a 2016 report, China has strengthened its construction capabilities to build air bases, cantons, and other physical infrastructures along the border. In 2016, connectivity among border areas occurred on land and in the air by building three airports in Shigatse, Ngari Gunsa, and Gonggar. China even added to the reconstruction of the airport by building underground shelters and new runways. This assertive attitude is further supported by deploying missile batteries to the air surface and sophisticated fighter jets located above 4,274 m above sea level (Jakhar, 2020).

China's assertive stance on the border dispute with India was further emphasized when reports from satellite observations said China had completed the construction of villages in the border region. The structure of the village is close to the LAC from Xinjiang to Bhutan. The development of the village was followed by the construction of 118,800 km of highways so that the villages have direct access to asphalt and concrete roads. These villages also have access to cellular communication networks. In October, hundreds of people were moved to the new villages singing the national anthem and waving the Chinese flag. A satellite image report published by Maxar Technology said that military storage bunkers followed the village development tactic. The construction of this village is considered China's move to show the expansion of its campaign to fortify border areas (Myers, 2021).

In addition to affirming military use and expanding construction development in the Himalayan Region, in the early quarter of 2022, China enacted a 'new land border' law. The law highlights that Beijing will defend its national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity. China said it would take all steps to protect its interests within the defined borders by any means, both military and economic. Another critical aspect of the border law is that it provides a 'civil-military fusion strategy that emphasizes improving public services and infrastructure along the border and including residents in territorial defense (Luo, 2021). Some experts even say the law would justify China's more assertive stance in resolving border disputes on terms it likes. This law would lead to further militarization of the border area, which some observers interpreted as making the negotiation process more difficult. Months before the law passed, China's Ministry of Civil Affairs released a new set of names for 15 locations in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. The new name is used for several locations, such as residential areas, mountains and rivers. Some observers said that this move was another Chinese attempt to increase pressure on India for control of one of the disputed areas (Wolf, 2022).

Factors behind the Changing Pattern of China's Foreign Policy

From the previous explanation, we can see from China's approach pattern or strategy in maintaining its existence on the Himalayan border. It can be seen that the strategy of military deployment followed by China's infrastructure development is currently increasingly assertive. Looking at the factors behind strategy implementation, the realist concept can provide a comprehensive explanation. National security has driven

China's foreign policy and doctrine in defending its territory. From the perspective of offensive realism, we can also see that China's recent assertive strategy towards India is in its national interest in its territory or sovereignty. In the case of dealing with India, China uses military instruments to protect its country, attack, and maximize its strength.

The military's contribution to China's policy pattern in the Himalayas is influenced, among other things, by the leadership principles adopted by Xi Jinping. During Xi Jinping's reign, military power was defined as having the courage to fight and win on the ground and a foreign policy tool. At the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2017, Xi Jinping even delivered a speech on how China can achieve national rejuvenation. Xi also explained a timeline for the implementation process was setting up, which was related to military modernization. Xi went on to say that this is meant to create a strong military. Xi's strong view of the military is evidenced by the fact that the Chinese Communist Party invests huge budgets and political capital to build a world-class military. China has also carried out impressive modernization of the PLA (The People's Liberation Army). The progress of the PLA can be seen from its improvements in technology to personnel skills. This modernization process is also supported by a significant increase in the calculation of China's defence spending.

Therefore, to achieve national rejuvenation, Xi also emphasized the importance of a military force that can fight and win. The use of the military aspects has provided evidence that China is currently using the terms coercion and force to change the status quo at the border. The deployment of thousands of troops, armed patrols, deployment of security equipment, and the construction of military outposts is evidence that currently, military power is still one of China's central axes in waging its aggressive ambitions against the Himalayan border region. Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese government was still carrying out its military mission by directing the PLA to launch covert attacks on the icy border in the Ladakh region. The clash in early 2020 that left dozens of soldiers dead is also believed that China was involved with sufficient preparation (E. S, 2021).

As aforementioned, China's assertive military strategy is followed by massive infrastructure development efforts in border areas. Beginning in 1950, China has built hundreds of thousands of kilometers of highways and railroads. Recently, the ambition to make 624 border villages has even started to be completed. The development project has given China a strategic position and a potential offensive platform against India in the Himalayas. Apart from increasing Beijing's influence in countries near the border, the main goal of its ambitious expansion of infrastructure around the Himalayas is to facilitate the mobilization of Chinese troops. It is designed to deal with scenarios in the event of a military confrontation with India.

When analyzing the distance between India and China to the center of the LAC sectors, India has shorter access distances than China. For example, to reach Arunachal Pradesh, China has to cover about 2,371 km, while India only has to cover about 1732 km. Next, for access to the Sikkim area, which is the intersection between China, Bhutan, and India, China has to cover about 2,095 km from Beijing, while New Delhi only covers a distance of about 1,508km. This also applies to one of the strategic areas of Ladakh. China

has to travel a distance of 2176 km from Beijing while China is only about 1023 km from New Delhi. The figures above have shown a quite significant comparison regarding the distance traveled by both parties to reach the disputed border area.

The comparison of distances proves that to get several strategic points in the disputed area. China had to take longer than India to legalize the reasons behind all efforts to build roads, railways, airports, and villages around LAC. Moreover, when viewed geographically, the condition of the Himalayan border, especially for the Ladakh part, is quite extreme. The high altitude followed by icy weather conditions makes it difficult for military troops to move. Through this infrastructure development ambition, China will facilitate China's access to deploy troops quickly in an attack scenario by India. The construction of roads followed by the construction of logistics and fuel posts will ease the distribution of military logistics materials when Chinese troops patrol in border areas. China's militarized infrastructure development projects helped renew China's expansionist strategy at strategic points of the LAC. One such ambitious project can be seen from building a road and rail network in the Silluguri Corridor, Sikkim. The construction of this road has proven offer China access to launch massive attacks when the escalation of conflict with India occurs in Doklam (Chellaney, 2021).

This is also in line with China's assertive approach to building hundreds of villages near the LAC from Xinjiang to Bhutan. In addition to strengthening military facilities, the construction of this village is a form of China's efforts to fortify the entire southern side of the country from Indian pressure. In 2019, the Tibetan national news website published an article essentially saying that China's rural development ambitions around the LAC attempt to consolidate the spirit of border development. In this case, China integrates the region and human resources, military property, information teams, sea, and air units to conflict and dispute mediation service stations. The construction of the information system is aimed at carrying out border information gathering operations by the Chinese intelligence team. The infrastructure development projects that have been carried out regularly have multiplied the proxy of China's strategy to strengthen its pressure on both land and maritime with India. Border villages are believed to limit the expansion of the old military power when military operations or clashes occur. In addition, to prevent a decrease in the strength of China's territorial claims, it is clear to give the border guard permission to consolidate his position along the border (Westcott, 2021).

Besides some factors described above, it can be seen that the implementation of the following assertive strategy over the Himalayas was a step for China to maintain dominance or to maximize its power in the region. Again, this was related to external influences in the dynamic pattern of China-India relations in the area. According to some researchers, the China-India border dispute is becoming very difficult because the parties involved are two Asian giants who both have ambitions to dominate the region. This situation is also related to the involvement of external parties who are worried that it can exacerbate the dispute that has already occurred. Although not a major geopolitical priority, China considers South Asia a critical region. This triggered a period of strategic competition when the United States helped made the South Asian region a key area of open Indo-Pacific development. The US-China bilateral rivalry and confrontation have

clouded cooperation in South Asia. India is one of the strategic partners chosen by the US to offset China's influence in South Asia (Panda and Baruah, 2019).

Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy released after the Doklam standoff has heightened China's suspicions of India. Through this cooperative relationship, India offered that Washington would facilitate cooperation in the defense industry, arms sales, and intelligence sharing. Washington then positioned New Delhi as a potential strategically.[32] China looks very sensitive to the Indo-Pacific strategy coupled with the fact that the alliance formed by the Indo-Pacific strategy has been seeking expansion of support to some of China's potential partners. This raises China's concerns about the existence of its power in South Asia. Since then, the US has become one of the most critical factors in China's policy towards India. For China, the presence of US-India cooperation can undermine the stability of border security. Thus, China increasingly emphasizes assertive approaches in dealing with India in the Himalayas (Sun, 2020).

In the international realm, assumptions about China's strategy and approach in border disputes with India continue to grow. particularly in Xi Jinping's leadership, this assertive stance has emphasized China's political resolve. China is taking aggressive steps to protect its territorial sovereignty, protect its country from India and as a step to maintain its dominance in the region. Unlike India, China has consistently deployed thousands of troops along with other military tools. This attitude is also supported by efforts to develop its border infrastructure on land, air and sea over the last three decades. In order to ensure troop mobilization, the infrastructure is used as a shield to strengthen China's claims to its border areas. Thus, China's development maintains dominance and resistance to pressure from India and other external parties. Despite the differences in the national interests of India and China, China's strategy is considered as one of the triggers on why of every attempt to reach an agreement on the Himalayan border often encounter the failure (Ranjan, 2015).

CONCLUSION

China's diplomatic relations with India started in 1949, and began to hit a dead end when India was included in the list of countries whose borders have not been completed with China. The conflict in the 3,488-long region began to emerge when China expanded its territorial claims on the border between China and India. Since the time of mutual claims, China and India have often been involved in attacks that have claimed thousands of lives. In response to the heated situation, the both sides-initiated dispute resolution efforts to find common ground in 1980. Plans for dialogue and agreements continued, unfortunately, they always hit a dead end and failed. Tensions between military forces continued to occur until the 2017-2020 period, China-India diplomatic relations were indicated to be at their worst. For a country, the territory is a sensitive matter regarding the dignity and sovereignty of a nation.

At first, China's assertiveness was not too much in dealing with India on the Himalayan border, but lately, China has become more assertive in taking a proactive approach. From an offensive realist perspective, China's assertive strategy can be

interpreted as China's steps in protecting its national interests in territorial sovereignty, as a form of anticipation against India and asserting China's dominance in the region. This research has outlined some of China's assertive attitudes and actions under Xi's leadership in the Himalayas case. First, by maximizing its military instruments, China utilizes its military power to defend and attack. This can be seen from the increasing violations and escalation of conflict between China and India. The military's contribution to China's policy pattern in the Himalayas is also influenced by the leadership principles adopted by Xi Jinping, especially related to his ambitions of national rejuvenation in military modernization. Xi still uses military instruments to protect the security of his region, especially from external attacks, including border issues. Second, it is carried out through efforts to build large-scale infrastructure and follow the increase in the aggressiveness of military instruments in border areas. In addition to building roads, bridges, and land, sea, and air transportation, China is also known for creating hundreds of villages on the edge of the Indian border. This infrastructure development is carried out to facilitate access and mobilization of security forces in the event of an attack by India and considers the disputed area to have extreme geographical conditions. Third, China has recently enacted a new land border law which, for some observers, is interpreted as justification for China's overall assertiveness in resolving border disputes on terms it likes. The law highlights China's firm stance in defending national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity and will also lead to further militarization of border areas. This new law is also meant to complicate the entire negotiation process in the Himalayan region going forward.

This paper has provided an overview that China's strategy has been changing, especially under Xi Jinping's leadership, in managing its border conflict with India. The application of the offensive realist framework in this paper has succeeded in explaining several reasons that have caused China under the leadership of Xi Jinping to adopt a more assertive approach to managing its border conflicts. Given that until now border conflicts in the Himalayan Region continue to occur and because this paper stops at explaining the reasons for China to adopt a more assertive approach, it would be better in the following research to discuss in more detail the impact of China's implementation of an assertive policy in Himalayan border management. Furthermore, research can also be about how India responds to and faces China's assertiveness in the Himalayan Region.

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