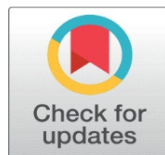


# INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS AND THEIR LIMITS: EVALUATING INDIA-CHINA BORDER CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MEASURES (2000–2020)

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## ABSTRACT

The India-China border dispute, a persistent geopolitical challenge, has seen numerous institutional mechanisms established between 2000 and 2020 to mitigate tensions through Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs). This study evaluates the efficacy and limitations of these CBMs, analysing their role in fostering stability amidst enduring territorial disagreements. Through qualitative examination of bilateral agreements, diplomatic engagements, and conflict incidents, the paper assesses key frameworks such as the 1996 Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures, the 2005 Protocol on Modalities, and the 2013 Border Defence Cooperation Agreement. Findings reveal that CBMs facilitated crucial communication channels—including hotlines, joint military exercises, and high-level dialogues—which temporarily eased friction and managed crises like the 2013 Dopsang standoff. However, recurrent clashes, notably the 2017 Doklam crisis and the lethal 2020 Galwan Valley conflict, underscore institutional shortcomings. Limitations stem from unresolved territorial claims, ambiguous perceptions of the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and inadequate enforcement mechanisms. Bureaucratic inertia, slow adaptation to on-ground realities, and a deficit of mutual political trust further weaken CBM implementation. The study concludes that while CBMs are vital for crisis management, their utility remains constrained without addressing core disputes. Sustainable peace necessitates integrating CBMs with robust diplomatic efforts to resolve territorial ambiguities and foster deeper strategic trust. The paper advocates for agile, transparent institutions complemented by political dialogue, highlighting the interplay between procedural mechanisms and broader conflict resolution strategies in one of Asia's most volatile borderlands.

**Keywords:** India-China Border Dispute, Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), Line of Actual Control (LAC), Institutional Mechanisms, Doklam Crisis, Galwan Valley Conflict, Territorial Ambiguity, Strategic Trust, Bilateral Agreements, Crisis Management

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Sino-Indian border dispute, a protracted territorial conflict arising from differing perceptions of where the boundary between China and India lies, has been a persistent source of tension and occasional military clashes. While the 1962 war remains a stark reminder of the potential for escalation, both nations have engaged in various confidence-building measures (CBMs) since the 1980s to manage tensions and prevent conflict<sup>1</sup>. This article delves into the institutional mechanisms established to facilitate these CBMs, evaluating their effectiveness and limitations in maintaining peace and tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) from 2000 to 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Fravel, M. T. (2008). Strong borders, secure nation cooperation and conflict in China's territorial disputes. Princeton University Press.

## Historical Context and Evolution of CBMs

### Early Efforts and the 1993 Agreement

Historical claims and unclear demarcations along the Himalayan boundary are the foundation of the border conflict between China and India. Although China won the 1962 war handily, the underlying territorial disputes remained unresolved, marking a turning point in bilateral ties. Both nations began a slow reunion in the 1980s after a period of tense ties, realizing the importance of communication and collaboration. As a result, the Joint Working Group (JWG) was formed in 1988 to deal with the boundary issue. One important step in stabilizing the border was the 1993 Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement (BPTA). It created procedures for military disengagement and confidence-building and legally acknowledged the LAC, albeit without a consensus definition. Until a definitive decision about border demarcation could be made, the agreement offered a framework for border security. Reducing military deployments in border areas and maintaining military forces at a minimum level along the LAC were among the main clauses.

### Providing advance notice of military drills in the vicinity of the LAC.

### CBM Expansion: Agreements from 1996, 2005, and 2013

CBMs were subsequently developed in later agreements in 1996, 2005, and 2013. Military disclosures during border exercises, troop reductions, and bans on firing, biodegradation, the use of hazardous chemicals, blast operations, and hunting with guns or explosives within two kilometers of the Line of Actual Control were all covered in the 1996 Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field<sup>2</sup>. Biannual consultations on border concerns and the sharing of troop movement information were described in the 2005 Protocol on Modalities for the Implementation of Confidence Building Measures. The two nations agreed to a Border Defense Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) in 2013. By exchanging information regarding military drills, aircraft, demolition projects, and unmarked mines, this agreement aimed to improve border defense forces' cooperation. Being the first CBM signed by military leaders, it was noteworthy because it showed a growing readiness to use military-to-military communication to handle border security issues.

These accords sought to lessen errors in judgment and avert mishaps along the LAC. However, given the recurrent border incidents and the 2020 conflict in the Galwan Valley, the efficacy of these institutional processes has been called into question.

### Institutional CBM Mechanisms

A number of institutional procedures were put in place to supervise and carry out CBMs between China and India. These consist of:

- Joint Working Group (JWG): Created in 1988 to use diplomatic means to resolve the boundary dispute.
- Expert Group (EG): Established in 1993 to deliberate on and carry out the CBMs specified in the BPTA<sup>3</sup>.
- The Special Representatives mechanism (SR) was created in 2003 to facilitate high-level political discussions around the issue of boundaries.

In order to handle border-related concerns and preserve peace and quiet, the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) was founded in 2012. A Director General level official from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a Joint Secretary level official from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs lead the WMCC. It is made up of military and diplomatic representatives from both sides.

A framework for frequent communication and consultations between the two nations was established by these mechanisms. The 2005 agreement also specified modalities for implementing CBMs, including as protocols for convening bi-annual meetings and exchanging troop movement information, in addition to these formal mechanisms.

However, a number of issues have hindered these institutional systems' efficacy, including:

- Absence of a Mutually Agreed LAC: One of the main obstacles to efficient border management has been the lack of a mutually agreed-upon and clearly defined LAC. Various interpretations of the LAC have resulted in a lot of violations and confrontations.

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<sup>2</sup> Gupta, K. (1974). Hidden history of the Sino-Indian frontier: II: 1954–1959. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 9(19), 765.

<sup>3</sup> Haddick, R. (2012, August 3). Salami slicing in the South China Sea. *Foreign Policy*.

- **Trust Deficit:** The complete implementation of CBMs has been hampered by a long-standing mistrust between China and India that stems from strategic rivalry and historical baggage. The 1962 war, conflicting accounts of historical events, and the influence of strategic competition on perceptions are the main causes of this lack of confidence.

- **Communication Gaps:** Miscalculation and escalation have been facilitated by disparate perceptions of situations and gaps in information exchange, even in the face of established communication routes.

- **Nationalistic Pressures:** Negotiators' flexibility and room for compromise have frequently been restricted by domestic political pressures and nationalistic attitudes in both nations.

### **Institutional Mechanisms' Boundaries**

The following features highlight the institutional systems' shortcomings in the context of CBMs along the India-China border:

**Incapacity to Prevent Escalation:** The 2020 conflict in the Galwan Valley illustrated the limitations of CBMs in averting escalation, although multiple agreements and protocols. Both sides suffered fatalities in the altercation, which also markedly increased tensions<sup>4</sup>.

**Limited Scope for Dispute Resolution:** CBMs have not offered a framework for resolving the underlying border dispute; instead, their main focus is on managing tensions and averting incidents. The boundary issue has not been resolved, which only serves to increase insecurity and mistrust.

**Asymmetrical Implementation:** There have been accusations that China selectively abides by agreements while bolstering its military posture along the LAC, raising concerns about the asymmetrical implementation of CBMs.

### **Assessing CBMs' Effectiveness**

#### **CBMs' Effect on Border Incidents**

CBMs have been helpful in controlling tensions and averting a major conflict between China and India, notwithstanding the shortcomings of institutional institutions. A number of border incidents have been de-escalated with the aid of communication channels and disengagement procedures. The 2020 violence in the Galwan Valley and the recurrent frequency of similar occurrences, however, underscore the shortcomings of CBMs in tackling the root causes of conflict. A mixed picture emerges from statistics on border incidents before and after the use of CBMs. While some research indicate that incidents are occurring less frequently, others show that they are becoming more complex and intense. These occurrences have also changed in character, moving from limited offenses to military buildups and more assertive acts.

Type of Incident	Number
Ground	24
Aerial	6

Export to Sheets

**Table 1: Types of India-China Border Incidents (2003-2014)**

The impact of these incidents has varied, with responses including:

Impact	India	China
Deployment of defence apparatus	14	3
Reinforcement of troops	6	1
Construction of Rail/Road Links	4	4
Military	1	1

Export to Sheets

**Table 2: Impact of India-China Border Incidents (2003-2014)**

<sup>4</sup> Haddick, R. (2014, November 24). Six ways to resist China's salami-slicing tactics. *The National Interest*.

## Expert Opinions and the 2024 Agreement

There are differing views among experts regarding the efficacy of CBMs. According to some, CBMs have played a crucial role in keeping things somewhat stable and preventing escalation. Others argue that they have been weakened by China's increasing assertiveness and strategic aspirations and have failed to solve the fundamental problems of the border dispute.

The changing global strategic environment, especially the rivalry between the US and China and Russia's place in Asian geopolitics, is a significant factor affecting the efficacy of CBMs. These geopolitical elements have affected the nature of the negotiations and complicated the India-China border conflict<sup>5</sup>. A border patrol agreement was made between China and India in 2024 in an effort to reduce tensions and remove troops from two strategic hotspots. This agreement made it possible to resume patrolling operations in accordance with established procedure and resulted in disengagement from all issues of contention that surfaced in 2020. Although this agreement is a step in the right direction, it is unclear if it will result in a more long-term solution to the border conflict.

## Techniques

A thorough review of numerous sources served as the foundation for this research report, including: • Academic articles and research papers: Analysing scholarly work on CBMs and India-China border relations from 2000 to 2020.

- Official agreements and documentation: Examining official agreements and papers pertaining to CBMs along the India-China border.
- News articles and reports: Examining news articles and reports about border disputes and incidents between China and India from 2000 to 2020.
- Analysis and opinions from experts: taking into account professional judgments and analysis regarding the efficacy of CBMs along the India-China border.

From 2000 to 2020, these sources were examined in order to assess the institutional processes and their limitations in relation to CBMs along the India-China border.

## Future Conflict Risk and Its Security Consequences

The first combat casualties on the disputed India-China border since 1975 occurred during the 2020 Galwan Valley encounter, which took place without the use of guns but served as a wake-up call, underscoring the possibility of escalation even after decades of CBMs. The event made clear how ineffective current systems are at averting war and controlling tensions in a complicated and ever-changing geopolitical landscape. Conflict risk in the future is still a major worry. Miscalculation or misinterpretation could result in escalation in the volatile scenario created by the absence of a clearly defined LAC, growing mistrust, and nationalistic tensions. The risk is further increased by the growing military buildup on both sides and the possibility that events would be heightened by nationalistic public sentiment and media narratives. The security of the region and the world would be significantly impacted by a wider conflict between China and India. It might upset trade and economic activities, destabilize the whole South Asian region, and possibly attract other powerful nations. Even while it is unlikely, the prospect of a nuclear conflict cannot be completely ruled out, which complicates the security calculation<sup>6</sup>.

A multifaceted strategy is needed to reduce the likelihood of future conflict. This involves a renewed commitment to peacefully settling the underlying border conflict, improved communication and transparency between military personnel, and ongoing political conversation at the highest level. International players, especially those with clout in the area, might contribute positively by fostering communication, supporting initiatives to boost confidence, and arbitrating conflicts. The institutional framework put in place to support CBMs along the India-China border has helped to control tensions and avert major hostilities. However, a chronic lack of trust, communication gaps, nationalistic pressures, and the absence of a mutually agreed LAC have hindered their efficacy. The conflict in the Galwan Valley in 2020 demonstrated the weaknesses of existing systems and the demand for a more all-encompassing strategy for border

<sup>5</sup> Kamata, H. (2016). *Approaches Japan can adopt to deter China's assertive behaviour in the international arena* (Doctoral dissertation, Tohoku University).

<sup>6</sup> Lin, B., Garafola, C. L., McClintock, B., Blank, J., Hornung, J. W., Schwindt, K., ... & Denton, S. W. (2022). *A new framework for understanding and countering China's gray zone tactics*<sup>1</sup> (Research Brief). RAND.

control and conflict settlement. Both nations must address the root causes of conflict going forward and fortify institutional frameworks for CBMs. This includes: • Defining the LAC: Preventing violations and fostering trust depend on working toward a consensus definition of the LAC.

- Improving Communication: Reducing errors in judgment and averting mishaps can be achieved by enhancing channels of communication and information exchange.

- Resolving the Trust Deficit: The long-term viability of CBMs depends on fostering trust via consistent communication, high-level involvement, and increased transparency.

Investigating Novel Methods: To reach a long-lasting settlement, it could be required to take into account novel techniques to dispute resolution, such as cooperative development or innovative solutions that take into account the needs of both nations.

The border relations between China and India are still unclear. Although there is some hope with the 2024 border patrol agreement, the fundamental problems still exist. A persistent dedication to communication, collaboration, and a readiness to address the underlying causes of the conflict are necessary to achieve long-term peace and stability along the LAC. The stakes are enormous not just for China and India but also for the international community and the larger region.

## 2. IN CONCLUSION

The institutional framework put in place to support CBMs along the India-China border has helped to control tensions and avert major hostilities. However, a chronic lack of trust, communication gaps, nationalistic pressures, and the absence of a mutually accepted Line of Actual Control (LAC) have hindered their efficacy. The conflict in the Galwan Valley in 2020 demonstrated the weaknesses of existing systems and the demand for a more all-encompassing strategy for border control and conflict settlement. Both nations must address the root causes of conflict going forward and fortify institutional frameworks for CBMs. This entails addressing the trust deficit, improving communication, elucidating the LAC, and investigating novel dispute resolution techniques. The border relations between China and India are still unclear. Although there is some hope with the 2024 border patrol agreement, the fundamental problems still exist. A persistent dedication to communication, collaboration, and a readiness to address the underlying causes of the conflict are necessary to achieve long-term peace and stability along the LAC. The stakes are enormous not just for China and India but also for the international community and the larger region.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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