

# The Severe Battle in Decades among Chinese and Indian Armies

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## ABOUT THE STUDY

The deaths of 20 Indian soldiers in a brawl with Chinese troops was the deadliest clash between the two nuclear-armed nations in decades, but hardly the first. The most violent encounter in decades between the Chinese and Indian armies arrayed along a disputed border high in the Himalayas did not involve any exchange of gunfire. Instead, soldiers from the two nuclear-armed nations fashioned weapons from what they could find in the desolate landscape, some 14,000 feet above sea level. Wielding fence posts and clubs wrapped in barbed wire, they squared off under a moonlit sky along jagged cliffs soaring high above the Galwan Valley, fighting for hours in pitched hand-to-hand battles.

Some Indian soldiers died after tumbling into the river in the valley below. Others were beaten to death. By the next day, 20 Indian troops were dead. It remains unclear if there were Chinese casualties.

The two countries' soldiers are not allowed to carry guns in the area, a reflection of the depth of the bad blood that courses through the ranks of the military forces on both sides in the disputed territory. The clash on Monday night, fought in one of the most forbidding landscapes on the planet, was a startling culmination of months of mounting tension and years of dispute. And it comes at a fraught moment, with the world focused on battling the coronavirus and with the nationalist leaders of both nations eager to flex their muscles.

Here's a look at how both nations arrived at this juncture, the battles that came before, and how The New York Times covered the conflict. The conflict stretches back to at least 1914, when representatives from Britain, the Republic of China and Tibet gathered in Simla, in what is now India, to negotiate a treaty that would determine the status of Tibet and effectively settle the borders between China and British India. The Chinese, balking at proposed terms that would have allowed Tibet to be autonomous and remain under Chinese control, refused

to sign the deal. But Britain and Tibet signed a treaty establishing what would be called the McMahon Line, named after a British colonial official, Henry McMahon, who proposed the border. India maintains that the McMahon Line, a 550-mile frontier that extends through the Himalayas, is the official legal border between China and India.

But China has never accepted it. In 1947, India declared its independence from Britain. Two years later, the Chinese revolutionary Mao Zedong proclaimed an end to his country's Communist Revolution and founded the People's Republic of China. Almost immediately, the two countries — now the world's most populous — found themselves at odds over the border. Tensions rose throughout the 1950s. The Chinese insisted that Tibet was never independent and could not have signed a treaty creating an international border. There were several failed attempts at peaceful negotiation.

China sought to control critical roadways near its western frontier in Xinjiang, while India and its Western allies saw any attempts at Chinese incursion as part of a wider plot to export Maoist-style Communism across the region.

By 1962, war had broken out. Chinese troops crossed the McMahon Line and took up positions deep in Indian territory, capturing mountain passes and towns. The war lasted one month but resulted in more than 1,000 Indian deaths and over 3,000 Indians taken as prisoners. The Chinese military suffered fewer than 800 deaths. By November, Premier Zhou Enlai of China declared a cease-fire, unofficially redrawing the border near where Chinese troops had conquered territory. It was the so-called Line of Actual Control. Tensions came to a head again in 1967 along two mountain passes, Nathu La and Cho La, that connected Sikkim — then a kingdom and a protectorate of India — and China's Tibet Autonomous Region.

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