An inflection point (Killings at the LAC)

- The **brutal killing of 20 Indian soldiers** by the **Chinese Army** in the **deadliest escalation** of violence between India and China on the **LAC** in nearly four and half decades puts a **heavy question mark** on an already fraught process.
- It has the potential to vitiate and undermine the **disengagement agreed** upon only a few days ago between **senior military officers** on both sides and harden the **standoff between the two countries**.
- Yet India must keep a clear and determined head. It needs to respond with calm deliberation and steely resolve.
- It must be **fully prepared to escalate** but it must not embark on such a course without a full assessment of what transpired on the ground, or without hearing out what the Chinese leadership has to say — and being mindful of what lies ahead.
- **When two armies are fully mobilised** and standing eyeball to eyeball, there is always the possibility of an accident that triggers an escalation that neither side wants.
- Monday night’s clashes came after both sides had publicly stated that the situation was under control and that disengagement had begun in the **Galwan area**.
- The **Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs** has accused the **Indian Army** of violating the consensus that the two sides arrived at, and **New Delhi has accused Beijing** of doing the same.
- **New Delhi** should activate all **political lines of communication** with Beijing, including the ones between the special representatives to the border negotiations and the foreign ministers, to make this point and take it forward.
- **Many in Delhi** have been lulled into complacency by previous diplomatic successes in defusing military crises in **Depsang (2013), Chumar (2014) and Doklam (2017)**.
- But Delhi can’t ignore the profound change in Beijing’s worldview and the new sense in Beijing that it can afford to take on all comers.
- China’s **growing assertiveness** in the **territorial disputes** with its neighbours, its simmering Cold War with the United States, and the PLA’s aggressive postures on the ground.
- In other words, India’s **political illusions about China** are becoming increasingly unsustainable and Delhi has arrived at an inflection point in its policies toward Beijing.
- If Beijing refuses to restore the status quo ante on the frontiers, it will push India irrevocably towards a comprehensive and long-term **political, diplomatic and military strategy of responding purposefully**.