What happened in Nathu La in 1967?

Context

- As reports of **deaths of Indian soldiers** in a violent faceoff on Ladakh border emerged, many took solace from the fact that **no rounds were fired** during the **physical clash** with the Chinese soldiers.
- While this certainly makes **these deaths more brutal** than being shot and killed, it also gives hope that an **escalation to kinetic means** – rifles, howitzers, rockets, missiles and fighter jets – can be avoided between the two nuclear neighbours.

History of the conflict

- The last military skirmish between India and China took place at **Nathu La** in September 1967. Before the skirmish escalated to artillery guns and threats of fighter jets, there was a **scuffle between the soldiers of the two armies**.
- The clash eventually left **88 Indian soldiers dead**. More than **300 Chinese soldiers were killed**.
- In the weeks and months ahead of the clash, the **Indian side had decided to fence** the border with **three layers of barbed wire**. Work started on August 20, 1967.
- On August 23, **about 75 Chinese in battle dress**, carrying **rifles fitted with bayonets**, advanced slowly towards Nathu La in an extended line, and **stopped at the border**.
- The **Political Commissar** — identifiable by a red patch on his cap, and the only one who could speak some English — read out slogans from a red book, which the rest of the party shouted after him.
- The Indian troops were “standing to”, watching and waiting. After about an hour, the Chinese withdrew. But they returned later, and continued their protests.
- On September 5, as the **barbed wire fence was being upgraded to a concertina coil**, the Political Commissar had an argument with the Commanding Officer of the local infantry battalion, Lt Colonel Rai Singh. Thereafter, work stopped.
- Work was, however, resumed on September 7. This provoked about **100 Chinese soldiers to rush up**, and a scuffle ensued.
- Beaten down by the Jats, the Chinese resorted to stone-pelting, and the Indians responded in kind.
- The Chinese sent across a warning through the Indian embassy: “The Chinese Government sternly warns the Indian Government: the Chinese Border Defence Troops are closely watching the development of the situation along the China-Sikkim boundary. Should the Indian troops continue to make provocative intrusions, the Indian Government must be held responsible for all the grave consequences.”
- The corps commander had ordered the fence to be completed on September 11. That day, as work started, the Chinese came to protest, led by the Political Commissar. **Lt Col Rai Singh** went out to talk to them.
- Suddenly, the **Chinese opened fire**, and Singh fell to the ground, injured.
- Seeing their CO hit, the **infantry battalion attacked the Chinese post**.
- But they suffered heavy casualties, including two officers, who were both given gallantry awards. Soldiers in the open were mowed down by Chinese machine gun fire.
- The Indians responded with artillery fire, and pummelled every Chinese post in the vicinity.
- Many more Chinese perished in these heavy fire assaults than the number of Indians who
were killed in the initial engagement.

- Taken aback by the strong Indian response, the Chinese threatened to bring in warplanes. When the Indians refused to back off, the Chinese news agency Xinhua denied these plans.

- Having sent its message militarily, India, on September 12, delivered a note to the Chinese, offering an unconditional ceasefire across the Sikkim-Tibet border beginning 5:30 am on September 13. This was rejected, but the situation remained largely peaceful until the 14th.

- On September 15, the Chinese handed over the bodies of Indian soldiers with arms and ammunition, saying they were acting in the interest of “preserving Sino-Indian friendship”.

- On October 1, another skirmish erupted at Cho La, but the Indians again repulsed the Chinese.