

# India's Modi opens strategic tunnel to disputed frontier with China

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India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday inaugurated a strategic Himalayan road tunnel that would give year-round accessibility to areas along the contested border with China.

The Sonamarg tunnel is part of a \$932 million infrastructure project that helps connect Indian-administered Kashmir with Ladakh, a high-altitude, cold desert region nestled between India, Pakistan and China that has been the subject of territorial disputes for decades.

As the 64-km-long passage, also known as Z-Morh, stretches beneath a treacherous mountain pass cut off by snow for four to six months a year, it is expected to increase mobility in the region and allow rapid deployment of military supplies.

"With the opening of the tunnel here, connectivity will significantly improve and tourism will see a major boost in Jammu and Kashmir," Modi said at the opening



India's PM Narendra Modi cuts a ribbon to inaugurate the Z-Morh or Sonamarg tunnel in Sonamarg of India's Jammu and Kashmir region on Monday. AFP

ceremony in Sonamarg.

The massive infrastructure project also includes a series of bridges, high mountain roads and a second tunnel — expected for completion in 2026 — of about 14 km that will bypass the challenging Zojila pass and connect Sonamarg with Ladakh.

"The inauguration of the tunnel ensures uninterrupted supply chains for military essentials, safeguarding lives by mitigating avalanche-related risks," Minister of Road Transport and Highways Nitin Jairam Gadkari said.

India's new tunnel opened amid an ongoing border dispute with China, which came to a head in 2020 following deadly clashes on their de facto Himalayan border known as the Line of Actual Control.

The conflict led the two countries to deploy thousands of troops to the area, as both sides stopped patrolling several points on the border in Ladakh to avoid new confrontations.

Last October, New Delhi and Beijing reached a deal to resolve the military stand-off after multiple high-level meetings aimed at

resolving the conflict.

"India has been trying to reinforce its border network so that it is able to provide logistics support for the army and in the process also help civilians," Prof. Noor Ahmad Baba from the political science department at the University of Kashmir told Arab News.

He said the tunnel is significant for its security and defense aspect and how it is improving connectivity to tourist spots like Sonamarg.

"(The tunnel) gives all-weather connectivity to the Ladakh region ... which is a strategically significant region because of the continuous tension with China."

India and China have been unable to agree on their 3,500-km border since they fought a war in 1962.

Last March, Modi inaugurated the Sela tunnel in the north-eastern border state of Arunachal Pradesh, which the government has said will strengthen strategic capabilities along the Line of Actual Control.