

Summary

On June 15, 2020, Indian and Chinese troops engaged in a brawl that left twenty Indian soldiers dead while causing an unspecified number of Chinese casualties. The clash is a part of a broader border standoff along the Galwan River between the two forces on the Line of Actual Control that is yet to be resolved. The Indian strategic community is broadly in agreement that this border dispute marks an implacable decline in India-China ties. They argue that the very basis of relations that emerged after former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing in 1988 has been shaken, if not destroyed. Yet, how did the two countries manage to reach this nadir in ties, and furthermore, what does the Galwan clash signify for the future of Sino-Indian relations?

This paper argues that, long before the present border dispute occurred, Sino-Indian relations had been steadily declining due to rampant misperceptions of the other side, contributing to a lack of trust. The most fundamental misperception between the two countries is the inability to comprehend each other's international ambitions, yielding the fear that their foreign policies are targeted against the other. This paper traces the impact and development of these misperceptions on Sino-Indian ties through three different phases before considering the future of the relationship after the Galwan dispute.

The first phase is the period immediately after the 2008 financial crisis, when China reoriented its foreign policy to accommodate its growing global ambitions. As China expanded its global role, it did not consider the implications of its actions on India. As a consequence, its new foreign policy was not well received in New Delhi, sparking a fear that China was attempting to undermine India's interests. In turn, New Delhi's counter to these policies fostered an antagonistic response in Beijing, which did not understand how its new foreign policy affected India's international interests. This set of interactions marked the first indication of the growing misperceptions and ensuing lack of trust characterizing Sino-Indian relations.

The second phase explores Beijing and New Delhi's new leadership and how this change hardened mutual suspicions about the other's foreign policy. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi instituted a new direction in Indian foreign policy, China's perception that New Delhi was trying to contain China hardened. Despite the Modi government's desire to continue the previous administration's emphasis on strong Sino-Indian relations, its Neighborhood First policy and closer ties with the United States were perceived negatively in China. Corresponding with these perceptions was Beijing's growing assertiveness vis-à-vis India, symbolized in the 2017 border standoff at Doklam and China's increased naval activity in the Indian Ocean. These actions convinced New Delhi that despite its efforts, China was not sensitive to India's international interests while also building a negative impression of Chinese President Xi Jinping's government. Hence, by 2018, misperception and mistrust became a pervasive feature of Sino-Indian relations.

One of the strongest manifestations of this situation was reflected in Sino-Indian attitudes toward the Indo-Pacific, which is the final phase of this paper. Here, policymakers in Beijing reacted sharply to U.S.-India cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, labeling it “containment.” That India’s growing influence in the Indian Ocean region stemmed from its position as a burgeoning international power was not accepted by China. Instead, China used these actions in the Indian Ocean region to justify its naval expansion, which it now deemed necessary given its perception that the United States and its allies were trying to restrict China’s maritime position.

These sections illustrate the extent to which each side has misinterpreted the other’s international position, entrenching a sense of distrust in Sino-Indian relations. As a consequence, ties between both countries have reached their lowest point since the 1962 war. Such a state of armed coexistence may persist, perhaps even, in an extreme situation, descending into armed confrontation. However, if both nations address the underlying mistrust in relations and build a stronger understanding of the other’s international position, it may allow for a degree of cooperation to coexist along with Sino-Indian rivalry. In this context, China must understand that, as the power aiming to displace the United States’ international position, China must make the first move toward facilitating a rapprochement with India. Such a process itself will not be easy, requiring a complete break from the erstwhile characteristics of the Sino-Indian relationship.

Introduction

The death of twenty Indian soldiers and an undisclosed number of Chinese soldiers in a violent face-off along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), on June 15, 2020, is an inflection point in the seventy-year relationship between Asia’s largest modern states.¹ Experts on both sides share this view. Brahma Chellaney has described it as the “tipping point” in India-China ties,² while Hu Shisheng calls it the “lowest point since the border war of 1962.”³ Each side considers the other to be responsible for this state of affairs. Former national security adviser Shivshankar Menon describes what happened in Ladakh as a “fundamental and consequential shift in [China’s] behaviour,” while Hu claims that it is the Indian government that has “stepped up efforts to act tough towards China.”⁴ China’s latest acts on the LAC in eastern Ladakh have, from the Indian perspective, fractured the border management framework that both sides have built since 1993 and seriously damaged India-China relations.⁵ Misperceptions appear to be deepening, and an absence of trust is at the heart of the discord. This paper examines dynamics between India and China to understand the factors that have deteriorated the relationship.

This paper posits that the reason for the deepening mistrust between the two countries lies in their perceptions and expectations of each other in the larger context of global relations. Both countries view themselves as civilizational powers and expect others to acknowledge this fact. Misperceptions often lead to one country ascribing intentions to the actions or behavior of the other country that might not have been the latter's intention, thus creating mistrust. Hence, going forward, both sides may need to rework their basic perceptions of the other side and reach a new perspective before tackling individual issues of concern. Writings by Indian and Chinese scholars have principally been used in this analysis. Western sources have consciously been excluded (excepting a few where the piece is co-authored by an Indian writer). The objective is to get a sense of how India-China relations are viewed through the eyes of the two players themselves.

The paper looks at the issue through three lenses. The first is an analysis of the foreign policy changes that have taken place in India and China since 2008 and the extent to which India and China were factors in those changes. The second is an analysis of the perceptions that each side has of the other and the role of the current governments in this process. The third and final lens is the emerging contestation in the Indo-Pacific between India, China, and the United States. There are other lenses through which this relationship may also be evaluated, such as China's alliance with Pakistan, but the older issues appear to have less salience. The more difficult issues appear to flow from either country's perception of the other's geopolitical aspirations.

A Brief Background to India-China Relations

Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in December 1988 was the beginning of a new stage in India-China relations. It led to fundamental policy shifts. First, both India and China agreed that this relationship would be fully normalized and would no longer be conditional upon prior settlement of the boundary question. Second, both also undertook to maintain peace and tranquility along the LAC pending a final resolution that was fair, reasonable, and mutually acceptable. Third, each acknowledged the legitimate contributions of the other in the maintenance of global peace and progress.⁶ This came to be loosely known among Indian circles as the Rajiv Gandhi-Deng Xiaoping *modus vivendi*.

In the early part of the 1980s, India had already begun to secretly explore the possibility of improving relations with Beijing.⁷ However, by the second half of the 1980s, some new factors came into play. One such factor was the close military encounter with China along the LAC in 1986-1987 in the Sumdorong Chu valley (known as the Wangdung incident).⁸ The conferment of statehood by India on the northeastern territory of Arunachal Pradesh in February 1987 further contributed to tensions between India and China.⁹

Another contributing factor was the impending normalization of Sino-Soviet relations under former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev as well as the ongoing process of normalizing China's relations with the West.¹⁰ There was speculation that the approaching general election in 1989 and the allegations of corruption in the Bofors gun deal might have been a factor in India seeking a foreign policy success.¹¹

India's perception was that China had a stable and pragmatic Chinese leadership under former paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, who had reached out to India's then foreign minister and later prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and then prime minister Indira Gandhi.¹² India hoped this would mean that China would be more amenable to a boundary settlement on a realistic basis, willing to institutionalize peace and tranquility through confidence-building measures, show greater respect for India's territorial integrity, and moderate the China-Pakistan partnership through better Sino-Indian relations.¹³ To pursue these objectives, the elements of Indian engagement with China included, inter alia, reduction of rhetoric, resumption of summit-level and other political exchanges, reopening of trade and commercial exchanges, relaxation of restrictions on people-to-people contacts, confidence-building measures in the border areas, the normalization of military-to-military relations, and greater cooperation in multilateral areas.

In the ensuing years there were positive or favorable outcomes from India's perspective. These included the rebuilding of leader-level interactions, the formal Chinese acceptance of Sikkim as part of India, important peace and tranquility agreements in 1993 and 1996, the Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question in 2005, reduced support to insurgent groups operating in northeastern India and adjoining areas, and the growth of business.¹⁴ However, China was unwilling to settle the boundary question based on ground realities. China also halted the LAC clarification exercise in 2003; concern arose after the year 2000 over its rapid infrastructure buildup along the LAC and in Tibet; it made no basic adjustments in its position on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir; and the sale of lethal weapons to Pakistan continued apace.¹⁵ By the mid-2000s, the worsening trade imbalance was also becoming problematic.

China might have presumed that it could secure a boundary settlement on its own terms in the Eastern Sector, that India would progressively severely constrict the activities of the Tibetan refugee community (as Nepal has done), that the Indian market would be open to Chinese goods, that India would remain sensitive to China's security on its southwestern border and supportive of China in the multilateral arena, and that it could confidently dehyphenate the India-Pakistan relationship and deal on easier terms with other South Asian countries.¹⁶

The peace and tranquility along the LAC gave China a greater sense of security and allowed it to build infrastructure without serious Indian objections; the Indian market was opened, and China became one of India's largest trading partners; there was incremental progress in securing Indian acceptance of Tibet as part of the People's Republic of China; and China made substantial inroads into South Asia, including through arms sales.¹⁷ The Chinese government's hopes for an early resolution to the boundary question were belied; their optimal expectations on the Tibet issue may not have been fulfilled; they thought that the China threat theory that was gaining ground in India was being officially encouraged; and the recalibration of India's ties with the United States after 2008 was a cause for concern.

Cheng Ruisheng, who served as China's ambassador to India in the mid-1990s, summed up the relationship as follows: "Inadequacy of mutual trust remains despite the rapid development of relations."¹⁸ There seemed to be two strands in Chinese thinking about India after two decades of the *modus vivendi*—one school of thought recognized that India's economic, scientific, and military capabilities were also on the rise, albeit not as rapidly as China's.¹⁹ On the other hand, many Chinese leaders had a dismissive attitude to India's claims to be a major power, considering them unrealistic and pretentious.²⁰ Both were ambivalent about the other's success and wary of the other's ambitions but also respectful and mindful that in the new century, both countries would rise in comparison with the rest of the world. The *modus vivendi* was already coming under some stress due to the emerging gap in the relative comprehensive national power of both countries, but most analysts on either side did not seem pessimistic about the future despite the air of mistrust that continued to hang over the relationship.²¹

The Changing Foreign Policies of China and India

India and China both witnessed economic growth in the 1990s. Consequently, this increased their influence at the beginning of the twenty-first century and found reflection in their changing foreign policies. Did the process of reshaping their foreign policies have any bearing on the future of the India-China relationship?

China's Changing Foreign Policies

Scholars like Wang Jisi and Yan Xuetong argue that by 2008–2009, the domestic situation as well as international developments called for a review of Deng's foreign policy of Tao Guang Yang Hui, or "keeping a low profile and biding time."²² Beside the fact that China's economy and, consequently, its comprehensive national power had grown substantially, China's reach for markets and resources had also increased the pressure for more involvement in global affairs.²³ There is a near-unanimous view in China that the global financial crisis exposed Western vulnerabilities and created space for the rise of China.²⁴ Then U.S. president Barack Obama's policy of rebalancing to Asia, combined with China's disputes with Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea and with Japan over the Senkaku (or

Diaoyu) Islands, were also factors that favored review and readjustment of foreign policy.²⁵ Tao Guang Yang Hui appeared to inhibit a more “can-do” foreign policy, or, as some Chinese scholars put it, “it was not logical for Beijing to keep harping on tao guang yang hui while practicing something else.”²⁶ According to Yan, Deng’s strategy of Tao Guang Yang Hui was intended to enrich China economically and to make up for time lost during the Cultural Revolution. This required China to sublimate its longer-term interests to the cause of economic growth. China had avoided any leadership role and had prioritized its relations with the United States above every other foreign policy goal.²⁷ China needed to move away from a country-oriented foreign policy to an issues-based one and from a policy that meant passive adaptation to global developments to an active approach in shaping the global environment.²⁸ The objective seemed to be to find a new organizing principle for China’s foreign policy.²⁹

The new approach was captured in the phrase Fen Fa You Wei, or “striving for achievement.” It was recommended that the focus of Chinese foreign policy should shift from building relations primarily on the basis of mutual trust to building relationships based upon common interests and that China should give equal priority to the neighborhood in comparison to the earlier period when it gave pride of place in its foreign policy to the United States.³⁰ The results of this intellectual churning became evident after Xi assumed the presidency and convened a conference on diplomatic work with neighboring countries in October 2013. He declared that

*doing well in the diplomatic work with neighboring countries stems from the need to realize the ‘two centenary’ goals and achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. China needs to work hard to advance diplomacy with neighboring countries, strive to win a sound surrounding environment for China’s development and enable neighboring countries to benefit more from China’s development for the purpose of common development.*³¹

This speech was considered as signifying a tremendous change in China’s guiding principles and foreign policy goals.³² Yan wrote that this new organizing principle of Fen Fa You Wei was no longer about making money but about making friends and about showing leadership in the neighborhood by building strategic credibility based on common interests—that is, by sharing China’s economic benefits with others and allowing the periphery to prosper from China’s growth.³³

However, the question of how China would deal with the United States remained critical to China’s foreign policy.³⁴ Beijing regarded the statement by then U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton on the U.S. pivot to Asia as a strategic objective intended to deny China geostrategic parity in the Asia-Pacific region.³⁵ China exhibited greater concern over U.S. moves in the region, not only with respect to their alliance partners but also in terms of building of new relationships, including with India, that were suggestive of containment.³⁶ Some Chinese analysts believe that this was a reason for China becoming proactive in shaping the regional environment and being more assertive, albeit in a defensive or constructive way.³⁷

The question is whether, and by how much, India was a factor during this reshaping of China's foreign policy. This gives an insight into the ways in which China perceived India. In Chinese research, India is regularly described as an important neighbor and a developing country. Chinese scholars spoke of the shared interests in multilateral affairs and of the phenomenon of both countries rising at the same time.³⁸ This was also when India and China appeared to move together on global issues, such as on climate change as well as via the Russia-India-China trilateral and the BRICS group (which also included Brazil and South Africa). Some Chinese scholars even referred to the absence of strategic contradictions between India and China, although it was accepted that there were serious differences over some bilateral issues.³⁹ Yet there appear to be hardly any references to India in the debate over the new direction of China's foreign policy. The United States, China, and Russia are consistently referred to as major powers in all Chinese writings of the time, and there are also occasional references to Japan and the European Union in this category, but India is rarely mentioned.⁴⁰ Perhaps China did not regard India as a strategic concern in the larger context of global policy. Nor did China regard India as a significant partner in handling the main strategic challenge of Chinese foreign policy—the United States. It is likely China concluded that India did not have the capability to either help or hinder China's rise in the world. This might explain why China considered India's relevance only in the context of China's periphery or in multilateral affairs where both were regarded as developing countries and emerging economies.⁴¹ Beijing appears to have also assumed that India may not seriously object to the Chinese worldview, and that individual concerns could be tackled bilaterally.

Though China did not consider India to be an ally or a threat to its growth, the revised Chinese foreign policy of "striving for achievement" had major implications for India. A major outcome, namely the spread of economic benefits by China in its neighborhood to build common interests and establish strategic credibility, which eventually took the form of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), touched upon one key element and one core Indian concern. The key element was India's traditional and historical influence in South Asia, and the core concern was Indian sovereignty over Jammu and Kashmir.⁴² There was no consultation between China and India over the BRI. Perhaps the Chinese assumed that India would align and dovetail its plans with the BRI.⁴³ Further, when China declared the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) a flagship project, it became difficult for India to associate with the BRI. Secondly, the assertion of Chinese power in the South China Sea coincided with the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s new activism along the LAC in Depsang (in 2013) and Chumar (in 2014), which fueled concerns in India.⁴⁴ Finally, China's anxiety over U.S. policy in the Indo-Pacific started to spill over into the India-China relationship. From the Indian perspective, China's approach appeared to suggest that India ought to be sensitive to Chinese concerns in this regard while it remained indifferent to India's concerns.

India's responses to China's new foreign policy where it appeared to affect India's interests, regionally and multilaterally, seemed to cause consternation and disquiet in Beijing. China's leaders felt that while they had done nothing detrimental to India's interests, India was responding in ways that could be detrimental to them.

India's Changing Foreign Policies

Indian experts generally concur that foreign policy came under governmental review in India a decade before China reviewed its own policy.⁴⁵ The policy of nonalignment, or equidistance, had become outdated by the late 1990s.⁴⁶ Unlike China, India was not consciously seeking a new organizing principle or grand strategy. Rather, it undertook a series of adjustments in the light of its experience. The Vajpayee government added the nuclear dimension; prime minister Manmohan Singh's government added the U.S. dimension; and the current Modi government has added the maritime dimension. Despite a belief in some Chinese quarters that Modi's foreign policy has marked a significant departure from past practice, a common thread runs through Indian foreign policy—the search for international space and the doctrine of multialignment.⁴⁷

There is, however, a notable difference in the drivers that caused India and China to readjust their foreign policies. For India, China was an important factor, whereas for China, India hardly seemed to occupy their thinking while crafting a new approach. Successive Indian governments consciously worked two tracks: building a strategic relationship with the United States and developing the modalities for engagement with China.⁴⁸ On China, after 1999, the Indian leadership made sincere efforts to reduce the salience of the boundary question through a joint process of clarifying the LAC and by creating a new, political-level special representatives mechanism to find a fair, reasonable, and mutually acceptable solution. Despite setbacks, the successor government of Singh persisted in engaging China and concluded the Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question in April 2005.⁴⁹ The high level of ambition was reflected in the decision to establish an India-China Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity.⁵⁰ This did not mean that India was blind to the challenges in this relationship. Instead, there was the underlying awareness that India may be engaged in a long-term rivalry with China, but such rivalry would not preclude significant elements of cooperation.⁵¹

Did China reciprocate India's desire for cooperation, from the Indian perspective, during this relatively stable period of relations? A small minority of Indian analysts maintain this to be the case until, they claim, the Modi government allegedly abandoned the policy and aligned with the United States.⁵² The more commonly held view, however, is that Beijing did not show sensitivity on India's core concerns even during the good years between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s. Reclassifying the region of Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet within a year of the 2005 agreement appeared to be provocative.

China also blocked multilateral lending for development projects in Arunachal Pradesh. By introducing stapled visas for residents of Jammu and Kashmir State, China seemed to show scant regard for India's claims. Months after the November 2009 terrorist attack on Mumbai, China's block on listing the terrorists in the United Nations Security Council 1267 Sanctions Committee in 2009 displayed a high degree of insensitivity on a matter of public importance. China's growing footprint in South Asia was also viewed negatively by strategic experts.⁵³ From mid-2009, there were public signs of frustration over the unequal benefits from the policy of engagement. Indian security analyst Chellaney was one of the early proponents of the view that new rifts had started to emerge that were exposing the underlying strategic dissonance and rivalry. He used the Chinese phrase "*wen shui zhu qingwa*" (slowly heat the water to kill the frog), suggesting that Chinese policy was to arouse minimal suspicion in India before the new equilibrium, to China's advantage, was established.⁵⁴

It was around this period that another perception gained ground: that China was the only major power seemingly unreconciled to India's rise.⁵⁵ India has always acknowledged China as a major power from the very beginning.⁵⁶ India was also steadfast in its support for China's membership in the United Nations and the World Trade Organization.⁵⁷ Many Indian experts feel that China, at least outwardly, rarely acknowledges India as a major power. Former People's Republic of China chairman Mao Zedong called India a capitalist "lackey" and Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru a "collaborator of imperialism."⁵⁸ Former premier Zhou Enlai spoke contemptuously, labeling India as a "bottomless hole" that desperately needed foreign economic assistance.⁵⁹ This view appears to persist in the Chinese foreign policy establishment, notwithstanding occasional references such as Deng's remarks about India, China, and the Asian Century.⁶⁰ Old impressions about the divisive impact of caste, poverty, and regionalism on India's potential to become a major power are still common in Chinese writings.⁶¹ The changes that have happened after 1990 are not given weight. One possible reason might be the lack of recent scholarship about India because, after the "reform and opening up" policy, China turned its attention westward. Shen Zihua writes about this lack of Chinese scholarship,

*I feel that China's relations with many of its neighbors, such as Vietnam, Mongolia and India are very complicated and changeable. But Chinese scholars have done little to research the history of these relations. Scholars and policy makers know little about the neighborhood. I believe that historians should be held responsible for this inability to provide policy makers with the relevant background knowledge.*⁶²

Adding to this feeling is the sense that China looks at India only and always in the context of major power relationships. This is captured in Mao's comment to then U.S. president Richard Nixon in November 1973: "India did not win independence. If it did not attach itself to Britain, it attaches itself to the Soviet Union."⁶³ In the early 1950s, China's conversations with Soviet leadership would invariably refer to India's attachment to the Americans, just as in the 1970s they would tell the U.S. leadership about India's attachment to the Soviet Union. This is not withstanding the fact that it was China that "leaned to one side" and allied with the Soviets in the 1950s, and then leaned in the other direction in the 1970s.⁶⁴

Thus, the way both countries shaped their foreign policies does appear to have some bearing on the current state of affairs. There is a growing asymmetry in terms of how India and China matter to each other's broader foreign policy goals. The feeling in India is that China is not willing to give due weight to India on global or regional matters. This perception is compounded by the way in which some of China's broader foreign policy initiatives—like the Belt and Road Initiative or its push into the Indian Ocean—have directly impinged on India's interests.⁶⁵ China appears, from India's perspective, to be taking actions that impede India's interests. India's reaction has been, correspondingly, to push back against China on matters of its core interests, like the BRI or the South China Sea. Beijing appears taken aback at the Indian reaction. As a Chinese analyst put it: "In recent years, on almost all specific issues concerning China-India relations, China has shown goodwill with the best intentions, but didn't receive the same good faith in return."⁶⁶ From China's perspective, India has not been a major focus of China's foreign policy because it is not considered an independent player with global influence. As a few scholars note, China tends to think of India primarily as a developing country and as a neighbor.⁶⁷ This suggests that during the reshaping of foreign policies by both sides, a possible mismatch in mutual perception may have been laying the ground for future misunderstandings and mutual suspicion even before Modi's arrival in mid-2014.

New Leadership in China and India

In mid-2014, India elected a new Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance government led by Modi. This was the first time in twenty-five years where any party had won an outright majority in the lower house of Parliament. The new leaders of India and China—Modi and Xi—had an early meeting in September 2014 that portended their continuing engagement despite the stresses that had appeared over the previous years. In early 2021, as the relationship appears to have crumbled, experts are also focusing on the styles of leadership as a possible factor. What, if any, was the impact that the new leaderships had on the relationship?

China's Views of India and the Modi Government

Chinese scholars like Ling Shengli say that when Xi declared the neighborhood a priority for China's foreign policy, he saw it as China vaulting from a regional to a global power.⁶⁸ China recognized that the situation in the neighborhood was complex because of Cold War legacies, hot spots around geopolitical boundaries, and the interference of outside powers (like the United States).⁶⁹ Therefore, a key Chinese objective was to build a community of common security in the peripheral region.⁷⁰ In South Asia, China appeared unable to make headway. Cheng Ruisheng felt that this was because China's policy of separately and parallelly developing relations with other South Asian states created apprehensions in India.⁷¹ China felt frustrated because India saw regional participation as a zero-sum game, whereas China was willing to accept India's traditional influence and work around it.⁷² This was a common Chinese view even before the advent of the Modi government.

When Modi met Xi in September 2014, the good optics were juxtaposed with the new prime minister's direct manner in raising India's concerns. When Modi made a return visit to China in April 2015, there were further signs of good chemistry, although the dedication of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor by Xi did not sit well with India.⁷³ Within a year, the Chinese strategic community appeared to draw some conclusions about the Modi government. The early assessment was that Indian foreign policy under Modi would be "assertive."⁷⁴ They noted that the "neighborhood first" policy was intended to re-enforce India's authority in South Asia and to offer economic benefits to counter China's strategic inroads.⁷⁵ The presumption was that it might be detrimental to China's interests. Such thinking seemed to fit in with China's analysis that India saw China's foray into South Asia in zero-sum terms.⁷⁶ India's focus on the maritime region of the Indian Ocean was also noted as the Modi government's intention to create an India-led maritime defense chain in the Indian Ocean, while pivoting to the Pacific by shifting from policies of Look East to Act East.⁷⁷ Finally, China determined that under Modi, India was gravitating more purposefully toward America. The unspoken point was that Modi's policy aimed to counter China both regionally and globally. Still, Chinese experts assumed that while India would be on strategic alert about China's forays into South Asia and the Indian Ocean, there was sufficient scope for coordination and cooperation in bilateral and multilateral affairs. The one discordant note that crept into the Chinese narrative was describing the BJP as a "right-deviant" political party.⁷⁸

Over time, the suspicions of the Chinese strategic community have hardened into certainties. India's behavior is judged on two geopolitical developments—China's BRI and the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy. On BRI, China thinks it has tried to accommodate India by proposing the format of China and India Plus One. India has failed to understand that China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative is not intended to seek confrontation but only to enhance strategic stability in South Asia.⁷⁹ With regard to the Indo-Pacific, the Chinese government appears to have concluded that India's strategic objective is to thwart China.

When speaking in higher moral terms like “Security and Growth for All in the Region” and “the Indo-Pacific Vision,” India belies its real intentions, Beijing believes.⁸⁰ The Chinese strategic community considers the Modi government as having abandoned its traditional isolationist stand in the maritime domain by moving toward strategic coordination with America. Rong Ying, vice president of the Chinese Institute for International Studies, which is affiliated with the Chinese Foreign Ministry, has opined that Modi’s objective is to project India as a leading power and not merely as a balancing force, even if it damages China’s interests and the strategic trust between India and China.⁸¹ The political ideology of the BJP is identified as a strong reason for this. India’s policy is being seen as guided by the BJP’s political interests rather than those of India as a whole.⁸² The correlation between the rise of Hindu nationalism as a hinderance to the development of India-China relations and the deterioration of relations since Modi became prime minister has taken deeper root in China. At the same time, there was also an overwhelming impression that the Modi Doctrine creates a beautiful vision, but that the reality is somewhat threadbare.⁸³ Chinese scholars feel that India is significantly trailing China on all global indicators and that the Modi government’s achievements rest on weak foundations—social divisions, poor infrastructure, and slowing economic growth.⁸⁴ It is probable that this perception may also have led the Chinese military to shape a more assertive stance against India along the LAC and may explain the series of incidents that have taken place since 2013. Chinese analysts tend to dismiss Indian aspirations to become a major power as exaggerated self-perception. From here, it is but an easy step for those experts to conclude that India will seek to fulfil its wider aspiration and agenda in the region and world by allying with China’s strategic rivals.⁸⁵

India’s Views of China and the Xi Administration

The leadership transition in China in 2012 was viewed with interest by Indian scholars. This was another generational transfer of power. Little was known about Xi. Most Indian strategic analysts thought Xi might be preoccupied with domestic consolidation.⁸⁶ Most Indians expected China to continue posting strong economic growth numbers, and public opinion was generally positive and even admiring toward China’s economic successes. The strategic community and elites remained cautious about China’s geopolitical moves, but not necessarily pessimistic about the overall relationship.⁸⁷ At the beginning of Xi’s first term in office, the general sense was that India-China relations would stay the course while being buffeted occasionally by Chinese geopolitical acts, which had become the pattern of the preceding decade.⁸⁸

China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea, which coincided with its activism along the India-China LAC, and the parallel announcements made by Xi in late 2013, in Astana and Jakarta respectively, of the BRI and the Maritime Silk Road caught the attention of experts. Xi became seen as a Chinese leader who was more likely to run foreign policy than his predecessors.

Xi's declaration of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as a flagship project under the BRI, with projects in the region of Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir, appears to be a turning point in Indian perceptions about China.⁸⁹ India has always been highly sensitive to China-Pakistan relations, although over time this has been tempered by a sense of realism that this is a strategic alliance that no amount of persuasion is likely to dissolve.⁹⁰ However, CPEC was seen by New Delhi as an escalation in flagrant disregard of a core concern.⁹¹

The relationship continued to worsen. In 2016 and 2017, China again blocked the listing of Masood Azhar, a leader in the Pakistan-based group Jaish-e-Mohammed, as a terrorist. China opposed India's Membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (2016). China continued to test India along the LAC, and there were reports of joint PLA-Pakistan Army patrols in Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir. Trade and investment, which ought to have provided glue to the relationship, fell victim to commercial motives. The trade deficit climbed from \$28.87 billion in 2012 to an unsustainable \$51 billion in 2017.⁹² China neither took the matter seriously nor concretely addressed the systemic deficiencies. China claimed that Indian products were uncompetitive, but it could not explain why Indian pharmaceutical, information technology, and automotive exports were unable to get access to the Chinese market when these products had made successful inroads into other competitive markets. Nor did China significantly invest in India despite Xi's promise in 2014 to bring in \$20 billion as investment.⁹³

When India took countervailing measures, Beijing took umbrage and attributed it to right-wing or Hindu nationalist pressure. Analysts such as Hu and Wang Jue argue that "the right-leaning tendencies in India's political ecology have laid the groundwork for the . . . Modi administration to pursue a tough foreign policy towards China."⁹⁴ In India, there was the growing feeling that, under Xi, sensitivity to India's concerns had diminished and the dynamics of the relationship had changed.⁹⁵ Matters came to a head during the 2017 Doklam crisis.⁹⁶ From India's perspective, China's push into the Doklam plateau—with the possible objective of unilaterally securing its claim on the Jampheri (or Zompelri) ridge—appeared to question the very basis of the Rajiv Gandhi–Deng Xiaoping consensus on the peaceful handling of disputes. Indian experts wrote that the "existing modus vivendi would have to be recalibrated and a new equilibrium would have to be found in India-China relations since both seem to have expanded their definition of core interests and are displaying much more sensitivity."⁹⁷

Thus, the mutual perceptions about the current leaderships appear to have been an important overlay on the underlying mistrust and misperception in India-China relations. Beijing appears to think that the Modi government is more assertive, less sensitive to China's core concerns, and more likely to side with China's rivals. It does not regard its policies or actions as having given proper cause for the Indian side to consider China as a strategic threat. No significant weight appears to be given to the fact that Modi has continued the policy of engagement (where they meet at informal summits) set by predecessor governments.

Beijing appears to have misinterpreted his style of showing a new realism in acknowledging and articulating differences with China and a certain self-confidence in asserting India's vital interests, as well as in seeking reciprocity, as a fundamental departure in substance from the approach of his predecessors.⁹⁸ This might, perhaps, be partly explained by the fact that China's engagement from 1988 to 2014 had only ever been with coalition governments, and Beijing might not have comprehended that a government that enjoys a majority also enjoys greater flexibility in foreign policy.

Perceptions in India about China's current administration under Xi have also significantly changed. Xi's China is seen as more willing to trample on India's concerns if India does not acquiesce to China's national objective of "moving closer to the center of the world stage."⁹⁹ Indian experts are also more ready to believe that China's "insensitivities" on India's core concerns are a matter of deliberate policy.¹⁰⁰ There is a broad sense that the benefits of greater engagement with China are one-sided.

Each side also feels that the other side is excessively playing the nationalism card. There is more open criticism on both sides about their political systems.¹⁰¹ There is a growing gap between how each side perceives themselves and how each perceives the other. Hence, misunderstandings are caused by differing identity recognitions and by differing interpretations of policies. There is a greater tendency for each to attribute malign intent to each other's policies, and a consequent reduction in the willingness to give the other the benefit of the doubt.

To the doubts over motives and mismatch in identity recognitions that had grown over time, a new external element crept into the relationship which, in the eyes of the two parties, meant two different things. When India felt neglected by China, the United States courted India. Where India considered the U.S. partnership a strategic move to give effect to its multi-alignment strategy, China viewed it from the narrower prism of Sino-U.S. rivalry. Did India's relations with the United States play a significant role in the worsening of trust?

The India-China-U.S. Triangle

The United States has been the guarantor of the regional order in Asia since 1945. China always considered the United States as an ideological challenge, but U.S. technology and capital were needed for China's modernization, and Beijing adjusted to U.S. hegemony until it was confident of its own strengths. India and America may not always have common positions, but their differences were never ideological, and India considers the United States a critical partner in its own modernization. As China prepares to challenge U.S. hegemony in the Indo-Pacific and India redefines its maritime policy to address domestic and strategic requirements, the U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific is worth examining, especially how likely it is to shape the course of future India-China relations.

China's View

Since then U.S. secretary of state John Foster Dulles told a conference in San Francisco that the United States would implement a policy of “peaceful evolution” to bring about change, the Chinese Communist Party has always regarded the United States to be a threat.¹⁰² Former Chinese leader Bo Yibo recalled Mao’s reaction to Dulles’s speech, saying, “Mao said that America wanted to subvert and change us. . . . In other words it wants to keep its order and change our system. It wants to corrupt us by peaceful evolution.”¹⁰³ Every subsequent Chinese leader has followed Mao in this core belief. India’s perceived proximity to the United States is thus a cause for Chinese concern. The concerns abated when Sino-American relations remained positive between the early 1990s and 2008, but they never entirely disappeared.

There is broad agreement in Chinese and Indian analysis that 2008 was a critical year for the India-U.S.-China triangle. According to one Chinese scholar, it was the year that China became a strategic competitor for America, while India became a counterweight.¹⁰⁴ Others put it more starkly—describing the shift in U.S. policy as one of de-hyphenating India and Pakistan and re-hyphenating India and China.¹⁰⁵ A good deal of Chinese research draws a direct connection between the U.S. pivot to Asia and India’s greater focus on the maritime domain, on the one side, to China’s expanding naval power and its push into the Indian Ocean, on the other side. These analysts suggest that the common strategic objective of India and America to deny China access to the Indian Ocean leaves it with no other choice but to build a blue-water Indian Ocean-going naval force.¹⁰⁶ This justifies the Chinese naval buildup as a response to establish geostrategic parity, and China defends its bases in the Indian Ocean as a legitimate means to safeguard its interests while providing international security of public goods.¹⁰⁷

Some Chinese scholars note that these Chinese activities have increased Indian anxieties, but they maintain that Indian concerns are overblown and even misdirected.¹⁰⁸ The Maritime Silk Road is not intended to displace regional powers, nor is China’s presence in the Indian Ocean tantamount to circumscribing India’s traditional role in the region.¹⁰⁹ In fact, some have claimed that China has no intention to reorganize the geopolitical structure in the Indo-Pacific but is only seeking to preserve the political landscape to ensure its own stability and growth.¹¹⁰ Hence, according to Chinese scholars, it is the pursuit of economic power, not geopolitical influence, that has required the creation of free trade agreements, new harbors, and other infrastructure in the Indian Ocean region.¹¹¹ They contend, therefore, that Western misperceptions about China are influencing India to misinterpret such Chinese policy.¹¹² Chinese scholars aver that if only India were to recognize that the two countries share common interests and responsibilities in the region, and if it removed barriers caused by third parties, China would still be willing to look at India as a strategic partner despite the prevailing bilateral problems.

Does the Chinese strategic community believe that India poses a threat to China's shipping and commerce in the context of the Malacca dilemma? While many Chinese experts have alleged that India wants to keep the northern Indian Ocean as its sphere of influence, fewer Chinese writings say that Indian activity poses a threat to China's use of sea lines of communication in this region. Their concern arises from the perceived U.S. attempts to contain China by converting the hub-and-spokes alliance system in the Asia-Pacific into a more interconnected security network across the Indo-Pacific that also includes India.¹¹³ This is encouraging India to show the Americans that it can be a reliable partner in the Indian Ocean in handling China. The Modi government is seen as positioning India as a balancer, fully engaged in balance-of-power politics.¹¹⁴ India helps the United States to tilt the regional balance in its favor. The resuscitation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—between Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—has added to the sense among Chinese strategic experts that India is part of the U.S. containment initiative.¹¹⁵ The consequent Chinese pushback for strategic equilibrium in the Pacific and northern Indian Ocean is leading to an overlap of India's strategic backyard with China's strategic periphery and, therefore, becoming a cause for rising tension between the two countries. China believes that India-China competition in the Indian Ocean serves U.S. objectives and Modi's foreign policy.

From China's perspective, the structural contradictions in Sino-U.S. ties grew under former U.S. president Donald Trump while economic cooperation, which was the ballast stabilizing U.S.-China relations, weakened after Washington started the trade war. Or as Yan put it, the era of "pretending to be friends" appears to be coming to a close.¹¹⁶ Chinese scholars recognize that this situation is not likely to change in any fundamental way under Joe Biden's new presidential administration.¹¹⁷ Therefore, they expect U.S. policy to accelerate the building of structures in the Indo-Pacific to contain, or at least slow down, China's rise. The United States' enhanced defense ties with India during the Trump administration—the 2+2 ministerial format, the foundational agreements for strategic ties (like the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, among others), and the increasing interoperability capability of the two navies—is among the most carefully studied aspects.

The Indo-Pacific is one area where India is becoming more of a factor in China's foreign policy making since 2017 because of its association with America.¹¹⁸ Some scholars have recently averred that China has made up its mind that India will lean toward the United States, and China will be the object of containment.¹¹⁹ There are others who feel that the India-U.S. relationship is not quite a quasi-alliance because India has not given up strategic autonomy.¹²⁰ It is likely that for purposes of external posturing and to pressure India, China may be talking up the alliance argument, but China may also be making the same fundamental error about seeing India only through the U.S. prism.

The possibility of closer India-U.S. ties in the Indo-Pacific is compelling Xi's China to build a powerful maritime position that can satisfy its national security requirements in this region and help to redefine the strategic equilibrium in the western Pacific and eventually beyond the Malacca Straits.¹²¹ This perspective is likely to complicate India-China relations greatly.

India's View

The Indian Ocean has become hugely important for India for many reasons, and governments since 1998 began to re-define India's strategic interests by focusing on the seas. It was Vajpayee's government that initialized both the Advanced Technology Vessel (nuclear submarine) program and the establishment of the Andaman and Nicobar Command. The Singh government brought a sense of urgency by hastening the nuclear submarine program and making the decision to build an indigenous aircraft carrier, the INS *Vikrant*. There is no gainsaying that China's emerging footprint in the Indian Ocean was one important factor in this. Since the late 1990s, Indian commentators and experts had seen a growing number of references to the Indian Ocean in Chinese writings, including military writings. The purchase of the mothballed Russian Kuznetsov-class aircraft carrier in the late 1990s also drew the attention of Indian experts.¹²² The northern Indian Ocean is generally regarded as a zone of Indian influence. In years past, India has tolerated other players, and as China's economy grows, it was expected that China would develop the means to protect its interests in the vital sea lines of communication. What concerned Indian analysts more were the negative inferences in PLA writings about India's intention to challenge China in this region.¹²³

China's concern appears to have grown out of India's maritime relationship with the United States. China does not acknowledge that this might be a consequence of its own assertive behavior in the Indian Ocean with seemingly scant regard for India's interests. The timeline is important here. China began the construction of ports and harbor infrastructure in the arc around the Indian peninsula—from Kyaukphu in Myanmar to Gwadar in Pakistan—in the end of the first decade of this century, giving rise to the "string of pearls" narrative. Instead of recognizing this as a legitimate concern, China appeared to give a geostrategic overlay on China's infrastructure activity in Indian Ocean by calling it part of the Maritime Silk Road. As Harsh Pant put it, "it is possible that the construction of these ports and facilities around India's periphery by China can be explained away on purely economic or commercial grounds, but for India this looks like a policy of containment by other means."¹²⁴

No effort was made to engage or address Indian perceptions or concerns. Chinese behavior in the South China Sea and China's naval activity in the northern Indian Ocean was viewed as gaining strategic leverage at India's expense.¹²⁵ It is in such circumstances that convergence between India and America needs to be seen. The Indo-American Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean, and the inking of enabling agreements starting with the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, took place after China's naval expansion and its assertive posture in the region. Instead of looking at India-U.S. relations from India's perspective, China sees them only in the context of Sino-U.S. rivalry. Thus, China concludes that India-U.S. naval cooperation is evidence of India's participation in the American encirclement and containment of China.

It is the author's belief that Chinese analysts should try to understand the Modi government's Indo-Pacific policy. There are important considerations such as India's economic and energy security, Islamic radicalism and terrorism, and narcotics and arms smuggling, as well as domestic requirements relating to the development of the island territories, preservation of the exclusive economic zone, and the building of coastal connectivity. India's interests in the maritime space have expanded in the same manner as China's. While India has never denied China's strategic requirements of rightful passage, Chinese strategists continue to question India's intentions of maritime cooperation with the United States. The sense that ending such cooperation would solve the problem is seen as self-serving and hypocritical. China has derived significant benefits from its association with America for three decades. Claiming that India-U.S. cooperation is only intended to stop the rise of China is regarded as a "cry-wolf" tactic.

Because the Quad is an important factor in China's mistrust of India's intentions, closer examination is warranted. When the idea of the Quad first emerged in 2007, the stridency of Beijing's response indicated that China's anxieties might have sprung from other considerations.¹²⁶ After then president Hu Jintao spoke about China's "Malacca dilemma" in 2003, China refocused on developing its naval power. The rollout of Chinese naval plans post-2010—the new claim (called the nine-dash line) in the South China Sea; a new party committee on maritime rights and interests; the largest warship-building activities globally; the militarization of the South China Sea; the systematic push for civilian oceanographic surveys in the Indian Ocean, including in the Continental Shelf and exclusive economic zones of littoral states; and its first overseas military base in Djibouti—suggest that its plans were already in an advanced stage well before the Quad.¹²⁷ It seems unlikely that Beijing's naval expansion was a consequence of the threat posed by the Quad.

The sharp divergences in approach and posture on both sides regarding the triangular relationship may be because both India and China see themselves as maritime powers, resulting in incompatible visions for their roles in the Indo-Pacific region.¹²⁸ This must be reconciled. It may not change the shift in the balance of power and opportunity for Beijing in the Indian Ocean region, but it will help India to deal with it, as well as for China to deal with the growing India-U.S. relationship. For the present, China's outright rejection of the idea of the Indo-Pacific appears to be solely based on conflating it with the containment of China. Such thinking is precisely what is likely to upset India and re-enforce the notion that China has no time or place for India as an independent actor. If Beijing thinks that the dissonance between India and China on this matter can be easily resolved if only India should see the BRI as a benign development strategy for China's rise and give up its Indo-Pacific vision because that it's part of an aggressive U.S. containment strategy against China, then it might only confirm the view in India that China's motive is to explicitly exclude India from the Pacific region, to confine it to the Indian Ocean, and to deal with the perceived rivalry in that limited space. This will increase the tension in the India-China relationship.

The Road From Galwan

Each side mistrusts the intention and behavior of the other. Bilaterally, each tends to impute malign motives to the other's actions while attributing benign motives to its own. This appears to have created an impression on the Indian side that China is not sensitive enough, and even indifferent, to India's core concerns, and on the Chinese side that China's goodwill toward India is not being reciprocated. The tendency of each side to dismiss the other side's explanations also suggests that mistrust runs deep. Beyond the mistrust of intention and behavior may lie a deeper reason. There appears to be a mismatch in identity perception on both sides. India feels frustrated because China does not give it the appropriate status as a country with regional and even global influence, although China thinks it is adopting a benign attitude because it does not identify India as a threat to China. Beijing may also think that India is seeking to benefit unduly from a life-and-death struggle that China is engaged in with the United States, although India is seeking closer ties with America for several reasons that may have nothing to do with China. Each side may also be getting locked into a self-created understanding of the internal dynamics and political behavior of the other side.

This view has also been articulated by Ye Hailin. He writes about the contrasting understandings and interpretations of each side's identity and standing. China and India have different views on their respective international status, different perceptions of each other's development strategies, and a perception gap in anticipated benefits that should derive from their respective policies on bilateral relations. China believes that the China-India relationship is a non-zero-sum game between a powerful country (China) and a less powerful country (India), while India considers it a zero-sum game between two equally powerful countries.¹²⁹

Meanwhile, Antara Ghoshal Singh has written that China may have tried to build a new type of major-power relationship with India around 2013–2015. She argues that this was a strategic adjustment that China made due to the growing U.S.-India relationship, the convergence of developmental interests, and the desire to be seen as benevolent rather than as hegemonic. However, the effort lost steam because the increasingly self-confident, pragmatic, and tougher India that emerged under the Modi government challenged China's strategic composure and wisdom.¹³⁰ It is logical that relations with India might gain a new salience in China's foreign policy when neighborhood diplomacy gained currency under Xi, but if China was trying to build a new type of major-power relationship, it did not consult India. If China's intention was to show benevolence and demonstrate convergence of interests, its missteps on Azhar, the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor sank the effort. If strategic adjustment in the India-China relationship is only to happen on China's terms, then no matter how hard China may try, it is unlikely to ever win over India.

Gaps in identity perception may, on the other hand, explain why India might seek to interpret China's desire to move to the center of the world stage as a further diminution of India's status, whereas China might attribute motives to India's cooperation with America in the Indo-Pacific. It would then boil down to the question of whether the two misperceptions are equal. China has global ambition and is engaged in a comprehensive rivalry with the United States, the current global hegemon.¹³¹ India is not engaged in a similar rivalry with America, nor does it have the same sort of global ambition to dominate the world that China has. China, therefore, may have more to lose from confrontation with India than vice versa. China ought to consider this and adjust its identity perception about India to give it due and proper consideration as a major power with an independent foreign policy, as an unfriendly or antagonistic India might make China's rise more complicated, particularly in the current global landscape where China is subject to greater suspicion and resistance from countries that dominate and control the current international system. Simply put, if the two sides cannot reconcile or manage their differing perceptions, both might lose, but China might have much more to lose.

This challenge may be summed up thus: China should ask itself whether the strategic and global dimension of India-China relations in Chinese foreign policy has disappeared or weakened so greatly to the point that bilateral disputes are gaining salience and what the implications of this are for China's rise. India could ask itself whether there is a changing dynamic in the world, and if there is the possibility of adjusting its policy toward China without compromising on its core interests.

Conclusion

It seems the two nations stand at a crossroads in the seventieth year of bilateral relations. They can go down one of four paths: a downward spiral toward armed confrontation; armed coexistence; coexistence with cooperation and rivalry; and partnership. Partnership looks unlikely at present. Armed confrontation would be an unwise move because both would be diminished to a lesser or greater degree. China, it is hoped, does not harbor visions of total victory. What separates armed coexistence from coexistence with cooperation and rivalry is trust. None exists at present. The trust will have to be built brick by brick, beginning with the LAC in eastern Ladakh. China should be prepared to put aside any idea that trust can be restored by decoupling the boundary question from the larger bilateral relationship.

The Rajiv Gandhi–Deng Xiaoping consensus is over. The boundary is fundamental to the relationship. China's gesture to restore the status quo ante will be helpful. Thereafter, a broader disengagement and de-escalation in the border's Western Sector could be worked upon with adequate written guarantees. The use of existing mechanisms to resolve the standoff is a positive factor. The key is to find a mutually acceptable resolution.

If a mutually acceptable resolution of the situation in eastern Ladakh in the near future is possible, it should then be feasible for the highest leaderships on both sides to reset the relationship. Modi and Xi have a good measure of each other and share mutual respect. They should be able to talk about the identity misperceptions and possible ways of reconciling their respective visions. A key consideration could be whether China can afford to have an antagonistic India on its border as it is moving to the center of the world stage and whether India can afford to close a door (or two, as Russia is also involved) to multialignment that has served it well. A frank exchange followed by broad understandings might lead to a road map that could trigger a top-down review of the relationship. If the two leaders are able to achieve this, there are political-level personalities on both sides with adequate experience, including the respective national security advisers (or equivalent) and foreign ministers, who can translate the broad understandings into policy. This might be the only way of building understanding and, over time, trust. It may also help to deal with specific questions at the functional levels, where both sides have different systems of decisionmaking and styles of negotiation, so that the two sides do more than simply speak past each other.

A discussion on the way ahead in bilateral ties will also need both to recognize that things have changed.

- Both sides should treat the military escalation in eastern Ladakh with equal seriousness.
- Even after the resolution of the present standoff in eastern Ladakh, both sides may be in a prolonged period of armed coexistence as a new normal. As the forces on both sides are likely to be relatively balanced, it would be advantageous for both to return to the agreements and understandings from 1993 onward and improve upon them. Clarifying the LAC is a crucial step in this effort.
- India has flagged the unsustainable trade imbalance at the front and center of the relationship, and this has gone unaddressed.¹³² China will need to work on resolving the trade deficit with India. At any rate, decoupling will happen selectively, in the same way and for the same reasons that China is choosing to decouple from the United States. A balanced trade and economic relationship might lay a solid foundation for future relations, given the size of both economies.
- Better understanding of each other's regional initiatives through open dialogue is important to build trust. The Indo-Pacific vision is as much a developmental necessity for India as the BRI may be to China. Part of building trust must be an open discussion on each other's intentions in key regions—South Asia and the northern Indian Ocean and East Asia and the western Pacific—as well as respect for each other's special positions in the western Pacific and northern Indian Oceans.
- The two sides would need to accommodate the legitimate interests of the other side on key partnerships: China's with Pakistan and India's with the United States. These may not be desirable, but in the current circumstances neither will give up its partners, and both India and China could talk through a modus vivendi on the red lines of concern.
- Acknowledgment of India's multilateral aspirations by China is overdue. If China can accommodate India's role, there may be ample scope for both to collaborate on a range of issues from global health and climate change to standard setting in new technologies. It is as much in India's interest to ensure that the rules for the digital revolution are not merely written by those who dominated the world in the previous two centuries.
- Public trust in China has been deeply damaged and is unlikely to recover for some time. Indians believe that China took advantage of the pandemic to bully India. Ways to rebuild public trust need to be identified.

The prospects of forward movement will depend on the lessons that China and India draw from the Ladakh crisis. If Chinese strategic experts believe that India-China relations hold no great prospects in the current international scenario and that India is already a quasi-ally of the United States, then it may be difficult to manage the bilateral differences and a period of more violent confrontation may arrive.¹³³ If Indian strategic experts believe that Beijing is intent on bullying or humiliating India because China's superiority in comprehensive national power allows it to permanently reset the frontier or to permanently damage India's global or regional profile or standing, then too, the situation might become confrontational.

If, on the other hand, the Chinese strategic community reevaluates its approach to India, and if China accepts that its India policy has not fully factored in the new realities about India and its importance in the region for facilitating or hindering China's rise, then a new basis could form for a relationship. The two countries are standing at a crossroads, and this might be the final chance to take the path to coexistence of cooperation and competition. If not, a new phase of antagonistic rivalry may be starting, with the countries sliding into possible confrontation as the strategic periphery of China collides with the strategic backyard of India in the Indian Ocean region.

About the Author

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