

PERSPECTIVE

India and China: On a Collision Course?

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ABSTRACT

Sino-Indian relations, which have long been fraught, took an especially adverse turn this summer with a military-to-military confrontation on the Doklam Plateau near the India-Bhutan-Tibet trijunction. After several weeks, Indian and Chinese forces withdrew from the region. However, neither side resiled from their respective territorial claims. This episode exemplified the troubles that have come to characterize the Sino-Indian relationship, especially since Prime Minister Modi assumed office in 2014. His regime, which is more nationalistic and reposes greater faith in the utility of force in international politics, had initially sought to diplomatically court the PRC in the hopes of improving their bilateral relationship. However, these efforts did not prove successful. Instead, the People's Liberation Army, as in the past, continued to undertake limited probes along the Himalayan border, while the PRC continued to make diplomatic, commercial, and strategic inroads into India's neighbours, trying to reduce India's influence in those countries. The Modi regime, in turn, sought to counter these initiatives through various efforts of its own in the neighbourhood. Beyond South Asia, India has also sought to enhance its ties with Australia, Japan, the United States, and Vietnam in an attempt to hedge against the PRC's growing economic and military assertiveness in Asia. These endeavours, however, have elicited hostile reactions from Beijing, which sees New Delhi as the only significant potential hurdle to the expansion of its influence in Asia. Despite Beijing's adverse reactions it is unlikely that the current regime in New Delhi will scale back its efforts to cope with what it deems to be significant threats emanating from its behemoth northern neighbour.

KEYWORDS: Sino-Indian border dispute, quadrilateral, Doklam Plateau, limited probes, Bhutan

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In the late summer of 2017, military units from the Indian Army and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) squared off on the Doklam Plateau at the Bhutan-Tibet-India trijunction. The crisis stemmed from the Chinese decision to construct a road on territory that Bhutan deemed

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to be its own. India, which is treaty bound to Bhutan, chose to quickly move Indian Army units into the area to prevent any road construction activities.¹

The military standoff occasioned much fervid commentary from both sides.² Lost in much of the discussion, however, was the larger strategic significance of the Chinese actions. The central argument of this essay is that the Chinese actions were actually emblematic of a larger strategy on the part of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to challenge India's position in South Asia and to weaken its ties with its neighbours.³ Indeed it will be demonstrated that for the last decade or so the PRC has been steadily confronting India in South Asia and its immediate environs.⁴

Owing to its size, its conventional military capabilities, its de facto nuclear weapons status and its record of economic growth since the early 1990s, India is the only Asian country that could potentially challenge the PRC's goal of pursuing a position of strategic dominance in Asia. Furthermore, the two states, as some scholars have also noted, are engaged in a significant competition for critical resources, especially hydrocarbons, in areas adjacent to the Indian Ocean region and beyond.⁵

Faced with the increasing assertiveness of the PRC, India has tentatively reached out to the United States to balance its growing strength. Indeed the expansion of strategic ties with the United States has represented a significant shift in India's foreign policy. The changes, in the view of more than one analyst, have been characterized as revolutionary.⁶ Even if one takes a more measured view, it is undeniable that the changes under the Narendra Modi regime have been more than merely cosmetic.⁷ In particular, India's increased willingness to work with the United States has no doubt piqued Beijing.

Apart from the strategic partnership with the United States, Beijing has

¹ For a detailed discussion of the background to this complex territorial dispute see Ankit Panda, "The Political Geography of the India-China Crisis at Doklam," *The Diplomat*, 13 July 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/the-political-geography-of-the-india-china-crisis-at-doklam/>.

² See for example Sutirtho Patranobis, "Unmistakable Message: Doklam Showed India Can Dig in Heels, Stand Up for Ally," *The Hindustan Times*, 29 August 2017; You Dongxiao, "Why China Cannot Back Down in the Doklam," *ChinaDaily*, 4 August 2017.

³ For a brief discussion see Sumit Ganguly, "The Doklam Dispute in Context," *ForeignAffairs.com*, 9 August 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2017-08-09/doklam-dispute-context>.

⁴ For a discussion of recent Chinese initiatives in the subcontinent see Christian Wagner, "The Role of India and China in South Asia," *Strategic Analysis* 40, no. 4 (2016): 307–320; for a broader discussion of the rivalry including its historical basis see Bertil Lintner, *China's India War: Collision Course on the Roof of the World* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018); for an alternative formulation of the sources of the border dispute and the onset of the 1962 war see M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict In China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁵ "Sino-Indian power preponderance in maritime Asia: a (re-)source of conflict in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea," *Global Change, Peace and Security* 25, no. 1 (2013): 5–26.

⁶ See for example C. Raja Mohan, *Modi's World: Expanding India's Sphere of Influence* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2015).

⁷ Sumit Ganguly, "Has Modi Truly Changed India's Foreign Policy?" *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (summer 2017): 131–142.

also looked askance at India's burgeoning relationship with Japan.⁸ In this context it is also reasonable to surmise that the PRC is likely to take further umbrage with the expanding security ties between India and Japan, as plans for the "quadrilateral" mechanism involving Australia, India, Japan, and the United States proceed apace.⁹ The stated goal of this forum is to promote consultation amongst the four states with a view toward maintaining freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific. However, there is no gainsaying that the four states have deemed this arrangement to be necessary because of the seemingly inexorable rise of the PRC and gnawing uncertainties on their part about its long-term goals in the region.¹⁰

These developments, in turn, have led the PRC to adopt a more aggressive stance toward India. Of course, the long unresolved border dispute between the two states has also enabled the PRC to periodically test India's preparedness and resolve along the Himalayan border through a series of "limited probes."¹¹

This essay will focus on how the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government sought to deal with the PRC and then delineate how Sino-Indian relations have evolved since Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime assumed office in April 2014. It will argue that after initial efforts to improve relations with the PRC and thereby to continue the policies of the previous regime, the new government felt compelled to adopt a more assertive stance toward India's northern neighbour. Admittedly, there is little or no question that the Modi regime has a more assertive view of national security issues. This orientation in some measure explains its readiness to adopt a more forceful stance toward the PRC. The willingness of the Modi regime to pursue a firmer approach, it will be argued, has led the PRC to respond in an intransigent fashion.

From the UPA to the NDA

For the most part, with marked exceptions, the UPA regime during both its terms in office (2004–2009, 2009–2014) adopted a set of conciliatory policies toward the PRC. Early in his first term, in 2005, Chinese Prime Minister Wen

⁸ Sutirtho Patranobis, "China has a message for India and Japan: Form partnership, not alliance," *The Hindustan Times*, 14 September 2017; for some background to the evolution of the Indo-Japanese strategic partnership see David Brewster, "The India-Japan Security Relationship: An Enduring Partnership?" *Asian Security* 6, no. 2 (2010): 95–120.

⁹ Saibal Dasgupta, "China Hopes India-US-Australia-Japan Quadrilateral Won't Damage 'Third Party,'" *The Times of India*, 5 November 2017.

¹⁰ For a discussion of both shared and divergent concerns amongst the members see Ankit Panda, "U.S., Japan, India, and Australia Hold Working-Level Quadrilateral Meeting on regional Cooperation," *The Diplomat*, 13 November 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/us-japan-india-and-australia-hold-working-level-quadrilateral-meeting-on-regional-cooperation/>.

¹¹ For a discussion of the concept of a "limited probe" see Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).

Jiabao visited India. The visit culminated in an agreement on trade and also on the resolution of the long-standing border dispute. Some Indian commentators also drew much comfort from the language of the joint communiqué. Indian interlocutors were pleased because it referred to Sikkim, an independent state which had been merged with India in 1975, as “the Sikkim State of the Republic of India.” That said, the PRC nevertheless did not formally state that Sikkim was an integral part of India. On the other hand, the joint communiqué made clear that Tibet was an autonomous region of China—a long-standing Chinese demand.¹²

Some improvements did take place the very next year in Sino-Indian relations. Specifically, the two sides agreed to re-open the Nathu La Pass, which had been closed since the 1962 Sino-Indian border war.¹³ This was a significant development and potentially an Indian concession because it would greatly facilitate the entry of Chinese goods into India. The cheapness of an array of Chinese consumer goods had made them quite attractive to Indian consumers.

Whatever goodwill that developed in Sino-Indian relations as a consequence of Wen Jiabao’s visit and the opening of the Nathu La Pass after a hiatus of forty-four years proved to be short-lived. In May of 2007, the PRC contended that an Indian Administrative Service officer from the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh did not need a visa to visit the PRC on the grounds that he was from a region that belonged to the PRC. The officer was to visit the PRC as part of a delegation of Indian bureaucrats.¹⁴

Matters continued to worsen during the UPA regime. In 2009, for example, a series of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) incursions took place near the village of Demchok in Ladakh, in the northern region of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. In large measure, the PLA could undertake these probes because of better infrastructure on the Chinese side of the contested border. Faced with these repeated PLA intrusions, the UPA decided to improve road and other transport facilities on the Indian side.¹⁵ It is also worth noting that slightly later in the year India bolstered its military presence in the disputed state of Arunachal Pradesh in its northeast. Specifically, it decided to deploy a new 15,000-strong division and drew up plans to deploy a second division within the next couple of years. It also floated a tender to acquire 300 light tanks that could be used in either the terrain of the northeast or in Jammu and Kashmir.¹⁶

¹² Brahma Chellaney, “Sikkim in India-China Relations,” *The Hindustan Times*, 6 June 2008.

¹³ Ambar Singh Roy, “Sikkim Traders Gung-Ho Over Opening of Nathula Pass,” *The Hindu*, 5 July 2006.

¹⁴ For a discussion see David Malone and Rohan Mukherjee, “India and China: Conflict and Cooperation,” *Survival* 52, no. 1 (February-March 2010): 137–158.

¹⁵ Ben Arnoldy, “Growing number of China incursions into India lead to a strategy change,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 9 September 2009.

¹⁶ Arun Joshi, “Indian Army to Deploy more troops along Arunachal border,” *The Hindustan Times*, 12 November 2009.

The next year saw a renewal of Sino-Indian tensions owing to reports of the entry of PLA troops into a Pakistani-controlled Gilgit-Baltistan region of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir. Indian policy analysts and China specialists argued that the Chinese decision to deploy troops in this area stemmed from its ongoing efforts to extend the Karakorum Highway all the way to the port of Gwadar in Baluchistan.¹⁷ Bilateral relations continued to deteriorate for the rest of the UPA's years in power as Beijing chose to up the ante on a variety of other issues. For example, in January 2012, it refused to grant a visa to a senior Indian Air Force officer hailing from the northeast. Though no reason was given, Indian interlocutors assumed that the decision was a signal that the PRC was disputing India's claim to wide swathes of territory in its northeastern region. Despite these irritants, as part of its ongoing negotiations with the PRC, India signed a border agreement in the same month. This accord was designed to facilitate real-time contact between the foreign offices of the two countries in the event of an incident along the border.¹⁸

Earlier, in 2010, China had denied a visa to General B. S. Jaswal, the Northern Army commander responsible for the security of Jammu and Kashmir. This decision had led the Indian government to suspend all bilateral defence exchanges.¹⁹ As the regime in New Delhi appeared to stiffen its resolve the PLA continued to probe and prod Indian forces along various parts of the Himalayan border.

In a move probably designed to test the preparedness and alertness of beefed-up Indian forces along the border, in May of 2013 contingents of the PLA crossed over into areas near Daulet Beg Oldi in Ladakh that India deemed to be within its territory. This probe was significant as it took place near the Karakorum Highway that the PRC had constructed through territory that Pakistan had ceded to it in 1963. The highway had enabled the PRC to link Tibet with the province of Xinjiang.²⁰ Only when confronted with Indian forces did the PLA end this standoff. Curiously enough, this incident occurred barely a month or so prior to the impending visit of the new Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang to New Delhi. Some Indian analysts argued that this incident had a larger significance beyond testing India's resolve along the border. In their view, it was designed to send a message that Beijing was unhappy about India's growing overtures toward other states, most notably Vietnam, with whom the PRC had long had strained relations.²¹

¹⁷ Press Trust of India (PTI), "China's Presence in Gilgit-Baltistan: NYT," *The Hindu*, 29 August 2010

¹⁸ For the text of the agreement see: <http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/17963/>

¹⁹ PTI, "China denies visa to IAF officer: Indian puts visit on hold," *India Today*, 6 January 2012; also see TNN, "China at it again, denies visa to Arunachal officer," *The Times of India*, 7 January 2012.

²⁰ PTI, Chinese PLA make incursion bids in Ladakh," *The Indian Express*, 5 April 2015.

²¹ Freya Petersen and Jason Overdorf, "China and India Withdraw Troops From Daulet Beg Oldie, Ending Standoff," *Global Post*, 6 May 2013, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2013-05-06/china-and-india-withdraw-troops-daulat-beg-oldie-ladakh-ending-standoff>; also see Heather Timmons, "Chinese and Indian Soldiers Withdraw From Disputed Territory," *The New York Times*, 6 May 2013.

Despite these various setbacks, the UPA regime persisted in its efforts to maintain and foster a working relationship with the PRC. To that end, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Beijing in October 2013. This visit was of considerable significance. In Beijing, Manmohan Singh presided over the signing of a major accord, the Border Defence and Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) designed to avoid conflict along the disputed border. Among other matters, the two sides reiterated that they would not use their military forces along the Line of Control (the de facto border) for offensive purposes, that they would avoid provocative actions, and they would exercise mutual self-restraint and would not harass each other's military patrols in border areas. In effect, this agreement was a significant confidence-building measure (CBM) built upon prior accords.²² Though this measure was no doubt important, other extant Indian concerns remained unaddressed. For example, the Indian delegation made no headway on the issue of stapled visas for Indian nationals from its northeast travelling to the PRC.²³

The tactical dimensions of this agreement became quickly apparent, as the border dispute, clearly, was no closer to a resolution in the wake of this crisis. Weeks after Singh's visit to Beijing the PRC referred to the state of Arunachal Pradesh in India's northeast as "South Tibet." The angry reaction from the PRC probably stemmed from the visit of India's president, Pranab Mukherjee, who had referred to the state as an "integral and important part of India."²⁴ Matters did not substantially improve during the remainder of the UPA regime. For example, in March 2014 a series of fresh PLA incursions took place in Ladakh. Only when Indian forces steadfastly stood their ground did the PLA units back off.²⁵

The Sino-Indian Relationship Under Prime Minister Modi

Amongst India's attentive public it was widely expected that there would be a more robust response to Chinese provocations when Prime Minister Modi assumed office in 2014. Modi, a member of the right-of-centre Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), made clear during the election campaign that he intended to adopt a tougher stance toward India's long-standing adversary, Pakistan. During an election rally earlier in the year, he also warned the PRC to abandon its "expansionist mindset." Obviously piqued by his public statement, the PRC hit back, saying it had "never waged a war of aggression

²² For a skeptical account of this agreement see Monika Chansoria, "India-China Border Agreement: Much Ado about Nothing," *Foreign Policy.com*, 13 January 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/13/india-china-border-agreement-much-ado-about-nothing>.

²³ PTI, "India, China sign border agreement; no breakthrough over stapled visa issue," *Daily News and Analysis*, 23 October 2013.

²⁴ Aakriti Bachhawat, "China's Arunachal Pradesh Fixation," *The Diplomat*, 16 December 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/12/chinas-arunachal-pradesh-fixation/>.

²⁵ PNS/Agencies, "China Makes Fresh Incursion Bid in Ladakh," *The Pioneer*, 19 March 2014.

to occupy any inch of land of other countries.”²⁶ Consequently, some within those circles, who had feared Modi would adopt a needlessly provocative posture toward the PRC, were no doubt pleasantly surprised when shortly after assuming office, he invited his counterpart, Xi Jinping, to India for a state visit.²⁷ To that end, in June 2014, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited New Delhi and held discussions with his counterpart, Sushma Swaraj, to lay the groundwork for Xi’s impending visit.

On the eve of Xi’s visit, two border incidents cast a long shadow. The first was a border clash that took place in Ladakh. On this occasion, the apparent precipitant was an Indian effort to build a canal along the undemarcated border near the village of Demchok. As the effort was under way, initially Chinese civilians mounted a protest. Soon thereafter units of the PLA quickly entered the fray. Faced with the PLA’s involvement India moved to bolster its troop presence in the region, leading to a three-week standoff.

This would not be the only incident that would raise questions about the future of the Sino-Indian relationship. Even as New Delhi prepared to greet Xi with considerable fanfare, including plans to host him in Modi’s home state of Gujarat, yet another incident marred Sino-Indian relations.²⁸ This encounter also took place in Ladakh, in the Chumar sector in the eastern part of this region, precipitated by a Chinese effort to level a rivulet and construct a road within what India deemed to be its territory. Indian forces, who had dealt with similar incursions, responded with alacrity and destroyed the Chinese-built track.²⁹ Various flag meetings between local commanders proved necessary before this standoff could be defused.³⁰ It is intriguing to note that these incidents took place even as the two leaders moved to substantially deepen bilateral economic ties. Xi and Modi, among other matters, signed a dozen pacts, discussed the expansion of cultural exchanges, education, and tourism, with the PRC promising to invest as much as US\$20 billion.³¹

It is important to underscore that unlike in the past, when previous regimes had sought to paper over or downplay Sino-Indian confrontations along the border, Modi categorically emphasized to his Chinese guest that these

²⁶ PTI, “Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi holds talks with Sushma Swaraj,” *The Times of India*, 8 June 2014.

²⁷ Sutirtho Patranobis, “China’s President Xi Jinping’s visit to India, focus on first lady,” *The Hindustan Times*, 9 September 2014.

²⁸ Jason Burke and Tania Branigan, “India-China border standoff highlights tensions before Xi visit,” *The Guardian*, 16 September 2014.

²⁹ Shishir Gupta, “China, India in border Skirmish ahead of Xi’s visit,” *The Hindustan Times*, 16 September 2014.

³⁰ DNA Web Team, “Chinese army makes fresh incursion into Ladakh: PM Narendra Modi likely to raise issue with President Xi Jinping,” *Daily News and Analysis*, 18 September 2014.

³¹ Rishi Iyengar, “A Border Standoff and Free Tibet Protests Mar Xi Jinping’s Arrival in Delhi,” *Time*, 18 September 2014; also see Victor Mallet, “China-India stand-off overshadows Xi Jinping’s deals,” *Financial Times*, 18 September 2014.

incidents were a significant issue. He made India's discomfiture clear when he told his guest that "a little toothache can paralyze the entire body."³² The visit and the incidents in Ladakh underscored a fundamental tension in the bilateral relationship. The PRC obviously was keen on expanding the scope of the economic relationship with India. However, it had little or no interest in moving with any dispatch in terms of addressing the vexed issue of the border dispute.³³

Might the incursions have taken place without Xi's explicit knowledge and sanction? Some have suggested that the incursions were the result of internal political machinations within the PRC.³⁴ This argument, though seemingly plausible, seems rather unlikely. Xi, according to most accounts, has significantly consolidated his power within the Chinese political order.³⁵ According to a highly regarded, senior Indian official with extensive experience dealing with the PRC, the conventional "bureaucratic politics" argument that suggests the possible competition amongst organizations to further their own parochial interests at particular junctures simply does not apply to Xi's PRC.³⁶

Despite these untoward and troubling incidents, Modi continued to press ahead in his efforts to engage the PRC. In fact, he even dispatched Swaraj, the minister for External Affairs, to Beijing to explore opportunities for some headway on the seemingly irresolvable border dispute.³⁷

Following her trip to the PRC in February, Modi himself travelled to China in mid-May 2015. About a month prior to Modi's visit the PRC announced its "one belt, one road" initiative. Shortly thereafter, India sharply protested this project as it would involve the construction of a road through disputed territory in Jammu and Kashmir.³⁸ In fact, it needs to be underscored that Indian policy makers continue to highlight their staunch opposition to this endeavour.³⁹

The visit, like that of Xi to New Delhi, involved considerable fanfare.

³² TNN, "Chinese incursion in Ladakh: A little toothache can paralyze entire body, Modi tells Xi Jinping," *The Times of India*, 20 September 2014.

³³ Jeff M. Smith, *Cold Peace: China-India Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

³⁴ See for example Eric Meyer, "Who Sabotaged Chinese President Xi Jinping's India Visit," *Forbes.com*, 23 September 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ericmeyer/2014/09/23/who-sabotaged-xi-jinpings-india-visit/#2484039070fa>.

³⁵ Chris Buckley, "Xi Jinping Assuming New Status as China's 'Core' Leader," *The New York Times*, 4 February 2016.

³⁶ Personal interview conducted with senior, retired Indian official, New Delhi, September 2015.

³⁷ Shannon Tiezzi, "China and India Want a Breakthrough on Their Border Dispute," *The Diplomat*, 5 February 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/china-and-india-want-a-breakthrough-on-their-border-dispute/>.

³⁸ Rezaul H. Laskar, "India, Pakistan Spar Over Economic Corridor Passing Through PoK," *The Hindustan Times*, 1 June 2015.

³⁹ Indrani Bagchi, "India slams China's One Belt, One Road Initiative says it violates sovereignty," *The Times of India*, 1 May 2017.

Among other matters, Modi visited the city of Xi'an, Xi's birthplace, where the bilateral talks were held. It is interesting to note that while Modi stressed the importance of settling the extant border dispute and the PRC's plans to pursue the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, which among other matters involved the construction of a major highway through disputed territory, the PRC instead focused on the possibilities of increased Chinese investment in India.⁴⁰ In the event, most of the focus remained on commercial ties and investments. A number of powerful Indian conglomerates signed agreements amounting to US\$22 billion in trade and investment prospects with their Chinese counterparts during this visit.⁴¹

Recent Developments

Despite these striking developments in the commercial arena, they simply did not translate into any gains in other relations. Since the conclusion of the landmark US-India civilian nuclear agreement, one that the PRC had vehemently opposed, India had been seeking membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), a body that regulates international commerce in nuclear materials. Despite American support some other states had expressed tepid opposition to India's entry into this organization given its unwillingness to eschew its nuclear weapons program and its staunch opposition to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The most significant stumbling block to India's inclusion in this body, however, remained the PRC.

In June 2016, with an impending meeting of the forty-eight-member group in Vienna, Indian officials made a concerted effort to persuade them to grant India membership.⁴² The PRC, however, proved to be utterly intransigent and dismissed India's request on the grounds that it was not an NPT-compliant state.⁴³ A renewed attempt, in 2017, to make some headway proved to be equally futile. Once again, it was the PRC that remained the principal impediment to India's ambitions.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Narendra Modi Starts Trip to China With a Burst of Sightseeing," *The New York Times*, 15 May 2015.

⁴¹ Saibal Dasgupta, "Deals worth \$22 billion signed during Narendra Modi's China visit," *The Times of India*, 17 May 2015.

⁴² Apparently, Indian diplomacy prior to this meeting was less than adroit. According to a key US Department of Defense official who had been involved in these discussions, Indian counterparts had adopted a rather unyielding position. They had, according to him, failed to offer any meaningful concessions which could have elicited more robust support from the United States and its allies, thereby helping to overcome the staunch opposition of the PRC. Based upon personal communication with former US official, September 2017.

⁴³ Elizabeth Roche, "Key NSG meeting today: China holds out despite high-level India plea," *liveMint*, 10 June 2016. <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/00OYqyQEJBeRKSJT2bS7oL/China-remains-main-hurdle-to-India-joining-Nuclear-Suppliers.html>.

⁴⁴ PTI, "China opposes India's NSG bid, says signing NPT mandatory," *The Economic Times*, 24 June 2016.

Even after Modi's seemingly successful visit to the PRC, certain other developments made clear that China remained fundamentally at odds with India on issues that had little to do with the long-standing border dispute. India, for years, had been imploring the United Nations to place certain Pakistan-based terrorist organizations on its list of global terrorist organizations. However, the PRC yet again instituted what was termed as a "technical hold" on placing Syed Salahuddin, the leader of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), a Kashmiri terrorist organization with ties to Pakistan's security establishment, on the terrorist list. This was obviously not an isolated event: in the past the PRC had refused to place Hafeez Mohammed Saeed, the head of the Pakistan-based, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), on the list, based on the grounds that it needed more information on the organization's links with Al Qaeda.⁴⁵

Similarly, later in October 2016, the PRC again came to the assistance of its ally Pakistan by placing a "technical hold" on listing Maulana Masood Azhar, the leader of the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) a terrorist group based in Pakistan, which had been implicated in a series of major terrorist attacks on Indian soil, including one against the Indian parliament in December 2001. Earlier in the year, the PRC had already blocked an Indian attempt to place a ban on the JeM leader following a terror attack on an Indian Air Force base in Pathankot in which his organization had been implicated. At this time, the PRC was the only member of a fifteen-country committee of the UN Sanctions Committee that had voted against India. The others had agreed to sanctions that would have put in place an assets freeze and a travel ban.⁴⁶

This diplomatic setback, however, did not lead to a complete impasse in relations. India continued the protracted negotiations with the PRC on the border issue. To that end it went ahead with the nineteenth round of talks on the subject. Accordingly, India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, who was also the designated special representative for these negotiations, agreed to meet with his Chinese counterpart, Yang Jiechi.⁴⁷

The PRC's stated reasons for its inability and unwillingness to help proscribe these organizations and their leaders under the aegis of the United Nations were, bluntly stated, disingenuous. The underlying reason had to do with China's extensive ties to Pakistan: the government saw little or no reason to sanction a vital ally in the subcontinent, which was for all practical

⁴⁵ PTI, "China mum on delaying India's call for UN ban on Pak militants," *The Hindu*, 1 June 2015.

⁴⁶ K. J. M. Varma, "China continues to block India's bid for Masood Azhar's UN terror listing," *livemint*, 1 October 2016. <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/StSJk5yzKx9BINrrSOBnHO/China-continues-to-block-Indias-bid-for-Masood-Azhars-UN-t.html>.

⁴⁷ PTI, "India, China hold new round of talks to resolve border dispute," *The Indian Express*, 20 April 2016.

purposes a strategic surrogate in the region.⁴⁸ Evidence of the PRC's virtually unstinted support for Pakistan mounted in 2016. In March of that year news reports emerged in the Indian media that the Indian Army had detected the presence of PLA troops at forward posts along the Line of Control in Kashmir. According to intercepted communications, the PLA forces were in particular locations to help in the development of infrastructure in areas under Pakistan's control. Earlier in 2015, PLA troops had been detected in the Tangdhar region, the site of a major hydroelectric power plant that a Chinese company was constructing for Pakistan.⁴⁹

Over the past couple of years, despite the burgeoning trade and investment relationship with the PRC, problems continued to dog the overall tenor of the relationship. Indeed, contrary to those who believe that trade and investment can help dilute intractable disputes, the evidence from the Sino-Indian relationship clearly suggests otherwise. Despite a substantial expansion of bilateral economic relations, there is no evidence that supports the proposition that it can ameliorate the contentious features of the relationship. Worse still, the economic relationship largely remains tilted in China's favour. India faces a significant trade deficit with no prospect of any improvement in the foreseeable future.⁵⁰ This factor may become more significant in the future as the Modi regime faces demands from domestic manufacturers who have been adversely affected as a consequence of a flood of cheap Chinese products. Furthermore, given the existence of a streak of economic nationalism within the ranks of the BJP itself, these pressures could prove to be more compelling.

The latest standoff at Doklam is a stark reminder that the PRC remains intent on bolstering its military capabilities near and along the disputed border. The initial efforts of the Modi regime to court the PRC obviously counted for little in Beijing. In the wake of the standoff it is hard to envisage how the strategic rivalry can possibly be contained, given that it has steadily worsened, mostly because of Beijing's intransigence.

The Relationship in a Global Context

The foregoing analysis has shown that the PRC remains intransigent on the border issue, it continues to support Pakistan at various bilateral and multilateral forums, and it is unwilling to support India in various global regimes such as in the arenas of nonproliferation or counterterrorism. In

⁴⁸ For a discussion of this nexus see Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 2015).

⁴⁹ PTL, "Chinese Army troops spotted along LOC in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir," *The Hindustan Times*, 13 March 2016.

⁵⁰ PTI, "India's trade deficit with China jumps to \$53 billion in 2015–16," *The Economic Times*, 1 August 2016.

considerable part, the problems in the Sino-Indian relationship must be placed in a wider historical and global context.

The origins of the Sino-Indian border dispute are quite complex and have been examined in considerable detail elsewhere.⁵¹ However, once the rivalry ensued, the PRC was relentless in its opposition to India. At a bilateral level, the PRC has posed a significant security threat to India since the disastrous Sino-Indian border war of 1962.⁵² This is not only because of its substantial nuclear and conventional capabilities in general but also, as has been carefully outlined here, because of its willingness to periodically test India's alertness and preparedness along the disputed border. Simultaneously, as the desultory border talks have demonstrated, it appears to be in no particular hurry to resolve the border dispute.

The threat from the PRC is not merely bilateral but regional. It has long bolstered the military capabilities of Pakistan, one of India's key adversaries. To that end it has assisted Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, enhanced its conventional capabilities and has, as demonstrated here, routinely shielded Pakistan from global censure despite the latter's obvious involvement with terror directed at India.⁵³

Beyond Pakistan, the PRC has also sought to expand its strategic influence in South Asia. To that end it has attempted to make inroads into Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Though Bangladesh faces no extant, sea-borne threat to its shipping, the PRC sold the country two submarines—much to New Delhi's consternation.⁵⁴ It has also sought to establish a strategic foothold in Sri Lanka. To that end it has agreed to purchase the port of Hambantota.⁵⁵ The acquisition of the port aside, in 2017 India also had reason to be concerned after the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) submarines docked in Sri Lanka. Only after vigorous Indian protests did the Sri Lankans rebuff further PLAN requests for port calls.⁵⁶

⁵¹ See for example Berenice Guyot-Rechard, *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910–1962* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁵² One of the best treatments remains John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015); also see Manjeet S. Pardesi, "Instability in Tibet and the Sino-Indian Strategic Rivalry: Do Domestic Politics Matter?" in *Asian Rivalries: Conflict, Escalation and Limitations on Two-Level Games*, eds. Sumit Ganguly and William R. Thompson (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁵³ On Pakistan's involvement with terror see S. Paul Kapur, *Jihad as Grand Strategy: Islamist Militancy, National Security and the Pakistani State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵⁴ PTI, "Bangla PM Sheikh Hasina defends Decision to Buy Two Chinese Submarines," *The Economic Times*, 13 July 2017.

⁵⁵ Narayani Basu, "China Buys Hambantota Port: Should India Be Concerned?" *The Diplomat*, 29 July 2017. <http://thediplomat.com/2017/07/china-buys-hambantota-port-should-india-be-concerned/>.

⁵⁶ Reuters, "Amid PM Modi's Visit Sri Lanka rejects China's request to dock submarines," *Daily News and Analysis*, 12 May 2017.

These efforts to woo Sri Lanka, of course, are quite apart from the PRC's long-term efforts to try and undermine India's position in the Himalayan state of Nepal. These efforts have proven quite successful. Among other matters, the PRC replaced India as the principal investor in Nepal in 2014. In 2017, it provided as much as US\$8.3 billion in grants, interest-free loans, and loans on concessional terms.⁵⁷

Beyond the immediate reaches of South Asia, the PRC has also sought to hobble India from pursuing legitimate economic interests in Southeast Asia. To that end it has vehemently objected to India drilling for oil and natural gas off the coast of Vietnam. Given India's acute needs for energy, it has refused to cave into the demands of the PRC.⁵⁸

China's bellicose reaction toward India's engagement with Vietnam may have backfired. India and Vietnam, which have long had a cordial relationship harking back to the era of Nehru and Ho Chi Minh, have been bolstering their security partnership since 2007, when a formal agreement on defence cooperation was signed. A shared concern over China's aggressiveness, no doubt, is leading to a tightening of the Indo-Vietnamese strategic partnership. Earlier this year, India agreed to sell Vietnam the indigenously designed Akash missile. It is also considering the sale of an Indo-Russian missile, the BrahMos, and is in the midst of training Vietnamese personnel to operate Russian Kilo-class submarines and Sukhoi-30 jets.⁵⁹

Finally, and especially as India has entered the global arena, the PRC has made every effort to constrain its rise. Despite its own abysmal record on nonproliferation it has sought to depict India as a less than responsible nuclear power.⁶⁰ This has been more than evident as India has sought to establish itself not only as a de facto nuclear weapons state but also to enter a vital global regulatory regime, the NSG.

Despite India's diplomatic efforts to court the PRC, its efforts to avoid provocative actions along the disputed border and to expand economic ties, it is more than evident that the PRC will continue to pique and trouble India at every available opportunity. It sees India as the only power in Asia that stands in the way of its quest for dominance in the continent and beyond. Consequently, as India seeks to build its ties with other Asian powers, especially Australia, Japan, and Vietnam, the PRC will invariably attempt to create diplomatic and strategic problems for India. Above all, the PRC has

⁵⁷ Anil Giri, "China looks at Nepal as potential gateway to South Asia, expands footprints in Market," *The Hindustan Times*, 19 October 2017.

⁵⁸ David Scott, "India's Role in the South China Sea: Geopolitics and Geoeconomics in Play," *The India Review* 12, no. 2 (May 2013): 51–69.

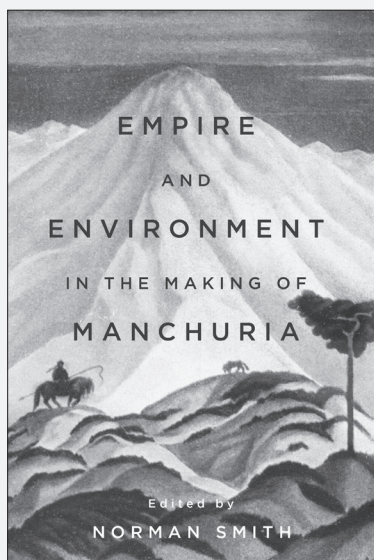
⁵⁹ Helen Clark, "Why Is India Risking Chinese Anger By Trying To Sell Missiles To Vietnam?" *South China Morning Post*, 13 January 2017.

⁶⁰ Evan Medeiros, *Reluctant Restraint: The Evolution of China's Nonproliferation Policies and Practices, 1980–2004* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007).

been, and will become even more assertive if not outright aggressive, as India seeks to bolster its strategic relationship with the United States.

The recent difficulties that have dogged the Sino-Indian relationship, most assuredly, do not primarily stem from the nationalistic features of the Modi regime. The regime's more forthright policies may have evoked a vigorous set of responses from the PRC. However, they can mostly be traced to a set of patterns and practices on the part of the PRC, designed to hem India within the confines of the subcontinent. Attempts on India's part to pursue a more conciliatory approach toward the PRC are unlikely to elicit more cooperative behaviour. Instead, a policy of firmness and resolve in its dealings with the PRC may at least help protect India's vital security interests.

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