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## Why India Is Becoming Warier of China

SHASHANK JOSHI

When the Chinese prime minister visited New Delhi, he challenged his hosts as to why they allowed Tibetan dissidents to operate on Indian soil and, even more egregiously, to conduct public protests during the official visit. India’s finance minister patiently explained that “we in India do not encourage anyone to conspire against China, but we cannot prevent people from expressing their opinions.” He added, pointedly, that “freedom of speech is the basis of our democracy.”

That exchange took place more than a half-century ago. The interlocutors were Zhou Enlai, communist China’s first prime minister, and Morarji Desai, then India’s finance minister. The occasion was Zhou’s 1960 visit to India for talks about the countries’ disputed border, which, after years of supposedly benign neglect, had emerged as a major irritant between the two nations.

India perceived bad faith in China’s apparent territorial acquisitiveness, in part because of what *Current History* contributing editor Sumit Ganguly has called Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s “uncritical acceptance of inherited colonial borders.” China, for its part, was convinced that India’s decision the previous year to offer sanctuary to the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan religious leader, portended an effort to absorb the Tibetan region. Although the visit preceded India’s traumatizing defeat by China in a 1962 war, it was met with furious Indian protesters who wielded signs exhorting, “Mr. Zhou, go back.”

In December 2010, another Chinese prime minister acted out an almost identical script. Wen Jiabao, arriving in New Delhi, was met with signs reading “Tibet’s independence, India’s security.” Days earlier, China’s ambassador to India

had warned that bilateral ties were “very fragile” owing to a chorus of criticism from Indian politicians and the media on a range of issues, including the old border dispute. Were relations to fray further, he cautioned, they would be “difficult to repair.” Nirupama Rao, India’s foreign secretary, played Desai’s role: India’s “Chinese friends,” she explained, “are increasingly exposed to the vibrant, I would say, noisy nature of our democracy.”

In fact, this noise has reached its loudest levels in years, despite diplomatic advances and exponential increases in economic flows over the past two decades. Familiarity, it turns out, has bred something approaching contempt, at least in certain quarters. The Indian media and commentariat have, in the six years since Wen’s last visit to the country, spared no effort in documenting putative Chinese perfidy along the disputed border, at sea, and around India’s increasingly contested periphery. There is no shortage of plausible hypotheses as to what has driven China’s recent actions and India’s countervailing efforts. Yet comparatively little attention has been paid to the factors shaping how the Indian strategic community, in all its kaleidoscopic diversity, reacts to these shifts.

Indian perceptions of China range from the implacably hostile to the unchangeably warm, with shades of fluctuating opinion throughout that spectrum. In my view, China’s gradual shedding of its peaceful-rise doctrine, its quasi-defensive efforts to consolidate its military position against the United States, and the success of India’s military modernization are the most important determinants of perceptions of China. These will help decide which strand of Indian thought regarding China will predominate in an emerging era of multipolarity.

### FROM THAW TO CHILL

Since the end of their revolutionary eras two years apart, India and China have interacted on the basis of superficial fraternity and territo-

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rial incompatibility. A decade of high hopes for pan-Asian resurgence under Sino-Indian tutelage, pushed by Prime Minister Nehru, was shredded by the 1962 border war. For nearly three decades, even as China shed its Maoist trappings and forged a market economy, relations remained stagnant. The late 1980s saw a series of openings, economic and otherwise, which culminated in agreements to resolve the border dispute peaceably and in line with certain political parameters, such as trying not to disturb settled population centers. And then, starting in 2005 and 2006, things soured.

In recent years, India's press and government officials have been complaining of escalating "border" transgressions. (Since there is no recognized border, or even a "line of control" as exists with Pakistan in Kashmir, transgressions are largely a matter of perception.) *The New York Times* interviewed an Indian analyst who claimed that the Indian military recorded 270 border violations and nearly 2,300 instances of "aggressive border patrolling" by China in 2008. Srinath Raghavan, a senior fellow at the Center for Policy Research in New Delhi, noted an "increased . . . frequency of patrolling" by the Chinese in 2009.

Meanwhile, Indians have seen in Beijing's diplomatic maneuvers a concerted effort to intrude into India's traditional strategic space. They accuse China of fashioning a chain of—mostly rudimentary, some even fictional—maritime facilities that could furnish Beijing with offensive naval options in time of war. This has strongly revived among both official and arm-chair strategists a notion that had fallen out of currency, and that has more often been associated with Pakistan's worldview—encirclement.

On land, the ring of states that the British once used as buffers for the Raj—Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan, and Myanmar—has fallen under increasing Chinese influence, with Beijing buoyed by the fastest-growing major economy in the world and a willingness to cut deals with regimes of all stripes. Even when India held a 30 percent stake in Myanmar's Shwe gas field, Myanmar's junta chose to sell gas from that field to China instead. In Nepal, where Indian security agencies long held sway and often dictated the political process, the ascendance of Maoists along with Chinese reconstruction activities shattered the illusion that the country was, like the Himalayas, a bulwark for the subcontinent.

Regarding Pakistan, Beijing had briefly veered toward neutrality when, in 1999, it refused to stand up for Islamabad during the Kargil War between India and Pakistan. By the end of the next decade, however, China was offering to build Pakistan two plutonium reactors. These will facilitate the miniaturization of nuclear warheads and therefore the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons, whose battlefield use by the Pakistani army would present India with grave problems of retaliation given Delhi's possession of disproportionately high-yield weapons.

Pakistan's nuclear program—which could not exist on its current scale but for Chinese transfers of warhead designs, fissile material, and missile technology—lies at the core of India's strategic dilemma: how to counteract state-linked terrorism emanating from behind a nuclear shield? Eleven years after the Kargil War, India remains deeply aggrieved that China tolerates and abets a Pakistani military establishment whose ties with militancy have flourished, and whose nuclear arsenal effectively disarms India's superior conventional forces, as was evidenced by a major standoff in 2002.

In the economic domain, although growth in trade volume has outstripped even the two countries' explosive growth rates, economic flows are profoundly imbalanced. As with the US-China relationship, trade ties between India and China are fraught with lopsided current account balances and neo-mercantilist overtones. India is concerned not only with its inability to diversify exports beyond primary goods—a division of labor that concedes higher-value-added production to China and Southeast Asian nations—but also with increasing penetration of Chinese telecommunications manufacturers into sensitive areas of the Indian market.

## WHY THE CHANGE?

The standard explanation for the worsening of relations relies on a security dilemma in Asia, suggesting that Chinese efforts to counteract American military supremacy in East Asia have unavoidable effects on the Sino-Indian military balance. A *casus belli*—the border dispute—is ever present, and the possibility of war therefore inheres in the relationship to an unusual degree. And since there is no guarantee that even a limited land war would not escalate, the naval, air, and

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missile balance is always relevant to how a clash might play out. But this narrative of strategic competition, though entirely plausible, tells us little about why the relationship—which had been generally improving since the late 1980s—foundered five to six years ago.

A second hypothesis is that the US-India civil nuclear cooperation agreement of 2006, along with numerous defense agreements that accompanied it, aggravated deep-seated Chinese fears of containment, already in evidence since India had begun drifting toward the United States in the 1990s.

China, facing key US allies to its east and a sizable US military presence on its western flank in Afghanistan, was not unjustified in harboring concerns about a shifting alignment. Privately, officials in the George W. Bush administration described India in the crudest possible terms as a counterweight to a rising China. Joint naval exercises among the United States, India, Australia, and Japan in 2007 further stoked fears of a democratic alliance targeting China. The problem with this explanation is that, even as Sino-American relations improved—to the point that President Barack Obama in November 2009 all but offered Beijing a “G-2” arrangement for managing global affairs—China’s concerns about India did not seem to recede.

Third, China’s precarious internal security may have driven its policy toward Delhi. In particular, concern over Beijing’s grip on Tibet and the western Xinjiang region intensified in 2008 and 2009 after major protests rocked both of those places. The Dalai Lama’s presence in India remains a major irritant, and the town of Tawang—in the northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, claimed by China as South Tibet—is a symbolically key site, to which the Dalai Lama fled in 1959. Perhaps China’s more muscular stance on the border may reflect its own insecurities.

But this view fails to account for earlier border tensions, such as when the Chinese ambassador to India surprised Delhi in 2006 by vocally renewing his country’s claim to Tawang despite earlier agreements not to disturb settled populations. It is in any case unclear whether India is correct in interpreting such Chinese actions as needling; they may rather represent an unintentional byproduct of Beijing’s general efforts

to improve border infrastructure and increase patrols. Moreover, China’s attitude toward India has hardened in areas entirely unconnected to the border, such as energy competition. In any event, though rivalry is fungible, territory is unlikely to be the engine that drives the wider relationship.

Fourth, and finally, could the chill be related to developments within China’s political and civil-military institutions? Since the early 1990s, budgets for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) have increased at double-digit rates. Andrew Scobell, a scholar of China’s civil-military relations, notes that first President Jiang Zemin and then President Hu Jintao have granted the country’s military leadership enormous latitude. Scobell describes “a roguish PLA operating on a loose leash,” and finds a “split in thinking and attitudes between China’s more hawkish military leaders and more moderate civilians.” This could explain an uptick in perceived border violations committed by China, as well as the expansion of the PLA Navy’s maritime footprint.

Moreover, China’s political establishment is undergoing a period of succession, with the Hu era drawing to a close. His likely successor, Xi Jinping, has considerable experience in the Central Military Commission and his ascendance will likely empower the armed forces further.

This hypothesis, however, also has problems. Why did the PLA’s greater influence in the 1990s fail to translate into greater brinkmanship with India, particularly at a time when Delhi was shedding its institutional anti-Americanism?

In short, we lack a compelling sense of why Sino-Indian relations have appeared to become more turbulent from 2005 onward, though plausible ideas abound. What has been less explored is the range of Indian views that have resulted from this change.

## INDIAN OSTPOLITIK

At one extreme of Indian opinion is a group that conceives of Sino-Indian relations largely in terms of raw power and perceives Chinese intentions as fundamentally malign. Bharat Karnad, now at the Center for Policy Research, is a former member of India’s National Security Advisory Board, and participated in the writing of India’s first draft nuclear doctrine. A well-known hawk, Karnad long pushed for the development of a

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thermonuclear weapons force capable of hitting Chinese population centers, a force validated with further nuclear tests. He argues that India's nuclear program has been and continues to be driven by concern over China, not Pakistan, the latter being increasingly "a sideshow."

According to Karnad, "what has kept India off balance is China's sophisticated multipronged strategy that is at once silk-gloved and iron-fisted," a strategy that combines cooperation with "bullying." Trade, he argues, is a "Trojan horse" for building up Indian vulnerability.

Karnad advocates, in the event of conflict with China, the use of sea-denial strategies such as naval blockades to sever China's energy supply lines—for instance by "squeeze[ing] the Chinese oil and trade lanes in the Indian Ocean." He also calls for "helping . . . Vietnam augment its strategic forces, cooperating with Taiwan in the 'peaceful' uses of nuclear energy, and exploring strategic measures with Japan to stifle China's expansionist ambitions, as payback" for China's assistance to Pakistan. In the context of India's strategic culture of restraint, this muscular "Indian Ostpolitik" represents a remarkably expansive and assertive vision of India's China policy.

Karnad's hard-line views have become increasingly common, particularly since the growing reports of border transgressions from 2006 onward. For example, Harsh Pant, an academic based at King's College in London, interprets China's behavior as an attempt "at preventing the rise of India as a regional and global player." He insists that "India cannot have a foreign policy shaped by the assumed kindness of its neighbors," implying the need for a more robust official reaction than has hitherto been forthcoming.

Brahma Chellaney, a colleague of Karnad's at the Center for Policy Research, has argued that "while Jawaharlal Nehru made the mistake of chasing romantic goals, the present prime minister has consciously chosen deal-making over deterrent-building." Chellaney charges that "the Indian establishment today willingly makes allowances for China's assertiveness."

Mohan Malik, a professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, has called this group of thinkers "hyperrealists," though a better description would be "offensive realists." They minimize the potential spiral effects of Indian assertiveness, emphasize Indian weakness vis-à-vis China while exhorting a robust response, and stress the efficacy of force and threats in international diplomacy.

This perspective appears to be widespread, though not necessarily predominant, among India's military and intelligence agencies. This is unsurprising. Not only was the army embarrassingly routed by China in the 1962 war, but militaries everywhere have organizational and cognitive reasons for favoring strategies that prioritize military force and relying on worst-case assumptions about their peers' intentions.

Furthermore, India's civil-military relations are characterized by extreme civilian domination. This means that senior officers chafe under a nonspecialist civilian bureaucracy that makes all major nonoperational decisions, and a political class that has shied away from using force to retaliate against provocations. In 2002, India mobilized its army against Pakistan but lost its nerve after a long delay. In 2008, after Pakistanis launched terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India's cabinet decided against mobilizing at all.

India's military is thus prone to see the civilian political leadership as weak-willed and overly trusting. In 2009, Bharat Verma, an army captain and editor of the reputable *Indian Defense Review*, made the dramatic claim that "China will launch an attack on India before 2012 . . . to teach India the final lesson, thereby ensuring Chinese supremacy in Asia in this century." This alarmist speculation was widely reported in credulous terms by mainstream Indian media outlets.

Vikram Sood, the former head of India's external intelligence service, the Research and Analysis Wing, wrote in more measured fashion that "China is determined to keep us . . . psychologically and strategically handicapped." Sood elsewhere warned that "while we may agonize over challenges across our land frontiers, we would be ignoring the new challenge in the Indian Ocean unless we plan countermeasures now."

For years, India's intelligence agencies were given assistance by the Americans and British to improve their intelligence-collection abilities against China, nurturing in the agencies' officers a focus on that country as an adversary. It is reasonable to assume that hard-line positions represent mainstream attitudes within such institutions, though one will find intelligence and military officers who argue opposite viewpoints.

## THE PRAGMATISTS

The national mainstream, however, differs. Steven Hoffmann, a professor at Skidmore College, has noted that between 1998 and 2003, "a core

perception” in the Indian strategic community was that “China does not constitute a clear-cut, direct military threat to India in the near term,” even if “the longer term is uncertain.” This means that “the possibility exists for India and China to avert major future problems through diplomacy and other forms of appropriate action,” instead of engaging in threats or urgent countermeasures.

Central to this pragmatic approach is an awareness of more benign interpretations that can be ascribed to Chinese behavior; also central is recognition of the dangers inherent in initiating a costly and unnecessary spiral of hostile moves. A study of the border dispute by two Indian analysts, Mohan Guruswamy and Zorawar Daulet Singh, argues in this vein that “imputing solely [hostility], and assuming it to be directed primarily against India, is too narrow an interpretation, stimulating equally insular policy options.”

Senior government officials, including in the prime minister’s office and the ministry of external affairs, appear to share this view. Shyam Saran, during his tenure as Indian foreign secretary, observed that “nervous articulations of a threat can trigger mirror-image and hostile perceptions on the other side,” adding that “there is no inevitability of conflict with China.” When Saran was asked about the threat from China’s maritime facilities—the so-called “string of pearls”—he joked that the “string of pearls . . . is a pretty ineffective murder weapon,” and insisted that “there are no Chinese bases in the Indian Ocean today.”

To be sure, one might argue that government officials, particularly diplomats, have strong incentives not to make public any distrust of an adversary. The US official and analyst Ashley Tellis, writing 10 years ago, observed “steady composure in New Delhi’s public statements about China . . . coupled with lingering suspicion of Beijing in private.” This phenomenon endures today, with officials much more candid when speaking behind closed doors regarding the border dispute and diplomatic competition. Nonetheless, these officials have similar incentives to speak cautiously about Pakistan, and yet many are far blunter in public about Islamabad.

Also, officials have incentives to speak forthrightly if they hope doing so may have a deterrent effect—diplomacy is not identical to conciliation—yet they rarely choose to take such an approach regarding China. When Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said in 2010 that “there is a new assertiveness among the Chinese . . . so it’s important to be prepared,” this marked a

radical departure from the reticence that had dominated his government’s statements about China.

Finally, certain groups deny that China poses any threat at all, and favor unilateral conciliation. India’s Communist parties, along with other groups on the far left, have long held this view. However, it has little traction in the center of the strategic community, where it is derided as naive and outdated. Indeed, India’s strongest proponent of friendship with China was once Nehru, but he grew embittered after the 1962 war and, reversing his hostility toward the military, sanctioned enormous increases in defense spending.

The 1962 war with China was a pivotal moment that shaped the role of idealism in subsequent Indian strategic thought. What we might call neo-Nehruvianism, in which the importance of cooperation with China is recognized, is now contained within a pragmatic middle that has no illusions about the long-term possibility of conflict. The frozen state of relations and glacial pace of border negotiations have legitimated a basic level of mistrust. A Pew poll in 2010 showed that only 34 percent of Indians held a favorable view of China (down from 46 percent in 2009), and 4 in 10 deemed the country a “very serious threat.”

## IN CHINA’S HANDS?

As is demonstrated by the recorded increase between 2005 and 2010 of Indians who believe China poses a threat—and by the sharp decline in favorable views of China in the past year alone—these perceptions do not exist in a vacuum. Nor are they a function of rigid ideologies or party affiliation. They are affected by the concrete state of Sino-Indian relations, which itself has lately been characterized by Chinese assertiveness. Indeed, the single most important determinant of how Indians will view China in the coming years is likely to be the distance China travels from its long-held policy of “peaceful rise” (later amended to “peaceful development”).

In 2010, China appeared to have made a significant leap away. In the summer, Beijing disconcerted many when it declared that the South China Sea constituted a “core interest,” in effect escalating its territorial disputes with a slew of Southeast Asian states. In September, when Japan arrested a Chinese trawler captain in the East China Sea, threatening to try him under Japanese law, China responded with remarkable anger. It suspended shipments of rare earth minerals, of which it produces 97 percent of the world supply,

and canceled various visits. China also refused to attribute to North Korea a deadly torpedo attack on a South Korean ship in March 2010, and later in the year declined to rein in its ally when it shelled a South Korean island.

But Beijing's assertiveness in fact began earlier. The 2001 Hainan Island incident, in which China forced down an American spy plane in international airspace and detained its crew, was of concern not just to Washington but also to China's neighbors, who read into it a signal of Beijing's willingness to take a hawkish line in disputes. In 2006, a PLA submarine surfaced near the USS Kitty Hawk, an incident that some in the Indian Navy viewed with alarm. Similarly, a Chinese antisatellite test in January 2007, though obviously intended to underscore the US military's vulnerability, concerned Indian officials as well.

These episodes of Chinese brashness loosen the "supply" of balancing partners available to India, pushing Southeast Asian countries as well as Japan and South Korea toward greater defense cooperation with Delhi. In November 2010, India's defense minister made a well-publicized visit to Vietnam, with which Delhi's relations have significantly expanded. Equally important, though, Beijing's recent behavior has strengthened hard-liners in India by legitimating the assumptions on which their worldview is built.

This is particularly significant because, for years, both India and other regional powers were deterred from overt containment of China for fear of provoking Beijing. That calculus has changed, and in 2010 may have undergone its greatest shift in a decade. China, by signaling its willingness to risk escalation and to use its newfound clout more openly, has flagged to the Indian public and strategic community that there may be a significant future cost associated with inaction.

India's perceptions are also conditioned by vulnerability. India has no means of forcing a settlement to the border dispute, yet many of its best military divisions are essentially diverted from the Pakistan front to guard against Chinese revanchism.

Meanwhile, China's economy has not only been growing at a faster rate than India's, but it has done so for many more years. As this situation

begins to balance, and India's growth rate equals and perhaps exceeds China's, a certain degree of confidence may accrue, shifting the pragmatists' preferences toward cooperation. According to a 2010 report on potential scenarios prepared by the US National Intelligence Council, "should China's growth slow by several percentage points, India could emerge as the world's fastest-growing economy as we head toward 2020." This would allow India to increase military expenditures while placing a lesser burden on the economy. Such an outcome is more likely if Delhi can initiate a new round of economic reforms.

But it also requires that India pursue its military investments with coherent political direction and strategic logic. Today, the country's carrier-centric naval aspirations are deeply vulnerable to the anti-access, sea-denial doctrine and technology honed by China over the past decade for use against the United States in a conflict over Taiwan. India's air force is acquiring first-rate aircraft, but with little sense of whether they are suited to the theater of operations in the northeast where, for instance, ground attack aircraft should be a priority.

The army has worked hard to develop a limited war doctrine for operating under Pakistan's nuclear

threshold, but its light artillery—an imperative for mountain war of the sort that could take place on the disputed border with China—remains a major concern, with procurement mired in corruption scandals and bureaucratic lethargy. Without successful modernization, spending growth alone will do little to mitigate Indian anxiety.

Although Indian strength and Chinese assertiveness appear to pull in different directions, there is of course no guarantee that India's rise will not in turn empower those in Beijing who see India as a threat to Chinese preeminence in Asia. Since precedents for simultaneously rising powers are so rare and idiosyncratic, predicting these interaction effects is a major exercise in speculation. What is clear is that the future of Indian attitudes toward China lies in the hands of those in Beijing who have, over recent years, pushed their foreign policy in more forceful directions. That much will be evident as well to the next Chinese prime minister who visits New Delhi. ■

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*The Indian media and commentariat have spared no effort in documenting putative Chinese perfidy.*

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