

# China and India: Awkward Ascents

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by Shashank Joshi

**Shashank Joshi** is a doctoral student of international relations at Harvard University's Department of Government, and an Associate Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London. He is interested in security studies, military affairs, South Asia and the Middle East, with a focus on the foreign and security policies of India, and civil-military relations.

*Abstract: This article surveys the key loci of Sino-Indian tension, situating them within the context of a classical if uneven security dilemma. It then examines the sources of stability within the relationship, arguing that the scope and intensity of conflict is attenuated by a series of military, political, economic and other factors. Lastly, the essay discusses the implications of the analysis for external powers, and the possible trajectories of the relationship.*

Great power aspirants have rarely, in the modern period, shared a border. The liberalizing reforms of China and then India unleashed the prospect of their demographic and economic destiny unfolding in uncomfortable proximity.<sup>1</sup> It may not be surprising then that their rekindled border dispute has been characterized as the crux of a new Cold War in Asia.<sup>2</sup> A flurry of reports have documented an Indian perception of rising Chinese incursions across the sprawling Himalayan borders that, nearly a half-century ago, precipitated a war in which the Red Army quickly humiliated India and dashed Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's dreams of a pan-Asian

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<sup>1</sup> Arvind Panagariya, *India: The Emerging Giant* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008); Barry Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> See, *inter alia*, Bruce Sterling, "The New Cold War: India and China are Picking up Where the US and Soviet Union left off," *Wired*, May 2003, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.05/view.html?pg=4>; Jyoti Thottam, "China Vs. India: Will Rivalry Lead to War?," *Time*, November 2, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1931739,00.html>; Jeremy Kahn, "Why India Fears China," *Newsweek*, October 19, 2009, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/217088>; Jeremy Page, "Tension Grows Between China and India as Asia Slips into Cold War," *The Times*, November 12, 2009, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6913250.ece>.

political renaissance under Sino-Indian leadership.<sup>3</sup> Today, the perceptions of Chinese probing at the border come amidst widespread Indian fears of diplomatic and maritime encirclement by an ambitious, qualitatively stronger and nuclear-armed neighbor. This has prompted New Delhi to accelerate and recalibrate its military modernization, fret over the faltering entente with the United States, and fix its gaze much farther east than its accustomed focus, Islamabad, to Beijing. Certainly 1962 is not 2011, and war is a remote possibility – but China and India look set to coexist, not cooperate.

Vikram Sood, the former head of India's foreign intelligence service, has discerned a "gradual and disturbing shift in the Chinese attitude towards India in the past few years."<sup>4</sup> Bharat Karnad, a member of India's first National Security Advisory Board and a drafter of India's first nuclear doctrine, sees India involved in a "subtle strategic tussle" to thwart China's plans to establish dominance in the extended region."<sup>5</sup> Reciprocally, China has sharply renewed its claim to an Indian province twice the size of Switzerland. After New Delhi announced the prospective deployment of two divisions to the disputed territory, the state-influenced *Global Times* warned that India "needs to consider whether or not it can afford the consequences of a potential confrontation." There remains a range of perspectives on each side, but these views flag an important shift.

What happened to the "10 years of mostly uninterrupted progress in their political, economic, and security relationship"?<sup>6</sup> Do the supposed border

<sup>3</sup> On the reports of incursions, see Sudha Ramachandran, "China Toys with India's Border," *Asia Times Online*, June 27, 2008, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/JF27Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/JF27Df01.html); Brahma Chellaney, "China's Next India War: Growing Chinese Assertiveness Against India," *Covert*, July 2008, <http://chellaney.spaces.live.com/Blog/cns!4913C7C8A2EA4A30!648.entry>; Edward Wong, "China and India Dispute Enclave on Edge of Tibet," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/04/world/asia/04chinaindia.html?pagewanted=all>; Ben Arnoldy, "Growing Number of China Incursions into India Lead to a Strategy Change," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 29, 2009, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2009/0929/p06s06-wosc.html>; Jim Yardley, "China Intensifies Tug of War With India on Nepal," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2010, sec. International/Asia Pacific, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/18/world/asia/18nepal.html?scp=1&sq=India%20china%20border&st=cse>; Dan Blumenthal, "Opinion Asia: India Prepares for a Two-Front War," *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2010, sec. Opinion Asia, [http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704240004575085023077072074.html?mod=WSJ\\_latestheadlines](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704240004575085023077072074.html?mod=WSJ_latestheadlines). On the 1962 war, see Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*, 1st ed. (New York: Ecco, 2007), p. 15; Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India: A Strategic History of the Nehru years* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010), pp. 7–8.

<sup>4</sup> Vikram Sood, "Frozen Smiles, Limp Handshakes: The India-China Relationship," *Asian Age*, October 28, 2009, [http://soodvikram.blogspot.com/2009\\_10\\_28\\_archive.html](http://soodvikram.blogspot.com/2009_10_28_archive.html).

<sup>5</sup> Bharat Karnad, *India's Nuclear Policy* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Security International, 2008), p. 108.

<sup>6</sup> J. Yuan, "The Dragon and the Elephant: Chinese-Indian Relations in the 21st Century," *Washington Quarterly*, 2007, p. 131.

tensions indicate a freeze in the already glacial progress made in relations between the two countries in recent years, and could “armed coexistence,” to invoke Mao’s phrase, give way to armed conflict? Outright conflict, however limited, would have profound consequences for the credibility of China’s doctrine of a “peaceful rise,” India’s hitherto benign image amongst the smaller pivot states of Asia, and the United States’ own finely balanced regional interests.

### **The Sino-Indian History**

India and China became neighbors only after 1950, when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) annexed Tibet a year after vanquishing the Nationalist Party. And so, as elsewhere on the crumbling fringes of the British Empire, another dispute appeared, borne of half-baked topographical diplomacy. In the east, the McMahon Line supposedly demarcated the Indo-Tibetan border – and thus, argued India, now separated the two young republics. In the west, at the northwesterly edge of the Tibetan Plateau, India half-heartedly claimed the entire high altitude desert of Aksai Chin without ever really gaining much of a foothold. Throughout the 1950s, India pursued a policy of benign neglect. It ceded its rights in Tibet and inked a seminal treaty of friendship with China, but assiduously avoided any mention of the border.

This policy began to fray over the years and, in 1959, collapsed in acrimony after a Tibetan rebellion culminated in the Dalai Lama being granted sanctuary in India – fleeing via Tawang, which lay on the disputed McMahon Line. Beijing was convinced that India sought Tibet as a colony, and that it was abetting American subversion there (both were misperceptions).<sup>7</sup> After growing armed clashes – including a weeklong siege – India came to see its “honor and self-respect” as well as “integrity and independence” at stake,<sup>8</sup> even though it privately admitted the weakness of its claims on Aksai Chin, through which China had built a road connecting Xinjiang and Tibet. Under intense domestic pressure from press and parliament, India instituted a “forward policy” in which patrols would extend deep into disputed territory. These were without the requisite military support and, after Mao’s domestic position strengthened in the latter half of 1962, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) was ordered to “liquidate the invading Indian army,” which it duly did. India received what Nehru was to later call “a

<sup>7</sup> Robert J. McMahon, “U.S. Policy towards South Asia and Tibet during the Early Cold War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3 (July 1, 2006), p. 141; Chen Jian, “The Tibetan Rebellion of 1959 and China’s Changing Relations with India and the Soviet Union,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3 (July 1, 2006), pp. 80–88.

<sup>8</sup> Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India*, p. 257.

permanent piece of education,” with the Indian plains to the south saved only by a unilateral Chinese ceasefire.

That status quo holds today, with India controlling Arunachal Pradesh in the east (claimed by China), and China controlling Aksai Chin, as well as tracts of Kashmir transferred to it by Pakistan in 1963 (both claimed by India). In the decades since 1962, a solution has seemed to depend upon the same compromise discernible before the war; each state would drop its claims on the territory *de facto* controlled by the other, India abandoning Aksai Chin and China ceding areas south of the McMahon Line. China proposed this swap in 1960 and 1980, though the offer was withdrawn thereafter. From 1985 onwards, China restated its claims south of the McMahon Line. Although the dispute has never seemed as intractable as that with Pakistan over Kashmir, progress has been desultory.

### **Why has China’s Stance Hardened?**

In the last four years, the status quo appears to have fractured. In 2006, a Chinese envoy to India insisted, a week prior to a visit by President Hu Jintao, that “the whole of the state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory.” He added that “Tawang is only one of the places in it. We are claiming all of that.”<sup>9</sup> For India, this flew in the face of a painstakingly formulated 2005 agreement, which had specified that “in reaching a boundary settlement, the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas.” In June 2007, the Chinese foreign minister again insisted that the mere presence of Indians would not dissuade China from claiming territory.

In March 2009, the dispute shifted a gear upwards, when China attempted to block a \$2.9 billion loan to India from the Asian Development Bank on the grounds that it was destined for development in Arunachal Pradesh. This almost certainly precipitated India’s announcement, some months later, of its intention to reinforce its theater military posture: a deployment to the northeast of two divisions of mountain units (roughly 60,000 troops, comprising a doubling of the regional numbers) and a squadron of Sukhoi SU-30MKI fighter jets (roughly 18 aircraft),<sup>10</sup> and acceleration of roads and airstrips. The idea, according to an Indian official, was “to tell the Chinese that we know they’re there and that we’re there as well.” China’s two military regions bordering India comprise 400,000 troops (a fifth of the country’s total) and Tibet’s military infrastructure has undergone dramatic improvement over the last decade to the point where Indian planners assume

<sup>9</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, “Indian might met with Chinese threats,” *Asia Times Online*, July 10, 2009, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/KG10Df01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/KG10Df01.html).

<sup>10</sup> Saurabh Joshi, “IAF ups focus on China,” *StratPost*, May 27, 2009, <http://www.stratpost.com/iaf-ups-focus-on-china>.

two Chinese divisions could be mobilized in 20, rather than the old 90–180, days.<sup>11</sup> India's shift would result in similar numbers of Indian troops in the region as are now stationed along the Indo-Pakistani line of control in Kashmir, and roughly ten times as many as fought in 1962.

These developments took place amidst proliferating reports that China had “stepped up military pressure . . . through frequent incursions.”<sup>12</sup> In 2008, these reportedly doubled from 140 to 280, and there were over 2,000 instances of “aggressive border patrolling” by Indian military accounts.<sup>13</sup> Brahma Chellaney, an Indian defense analyst, reported that “forays into Indian-held territory are occurring even in the only area where Beijing does not dispute the frontier – Sikkim's 206-kilometer border with Tibet.” If true, that would represent an escalation of sorts.<sup>14</sup>

Accounts of incursions are deeply unreliable owing to the terrain and imprecision of the putative boundary.<sup>15</sup> The Indian Army chief, Deepak Kapoor, acknowledged that intrusions were a matter of perception, adding in February 2010 that “there have been no major issues of Chinese transgressions so to say” and insisting that there had been no occupation of Indian territory, as was widely reported in the Indian press.<sup>16</sup> This is natural, since – unlike nearly every other disputed border in the world – there is no agreed Line of Actual Control. Nor do we have any sense of Indian incursions, given China's greater caution in invoking a transgression. This basic ambiguity, and its acknowledgement by Indian officials, is important to note when evaluating sensationalist accounts. However, there is little reason to assume that the unreliability of media accounts was greater after 2006 than before. India's former National Security Advisor, Brajesh Mishra, appears correct in suggesting that the Chinese claims on Arunachal Pradesh have acquired a stridency that was never there before earlier. Is this a change in foreign policy?

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Holslag, “The Persistent Military Security Dilemma between China and India,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2009, p. 823.

<sup>12</sup> Brahma Chellaney, “Obama Should Speak up for India in Beijing,” *Financial Times*, November 13, 2009, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/8ad9b826-cff3-11de-a36d-00144feabdc0.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Wong, “China and India Dispute Enclave on Edge of Tibet.” Saurabh Joshi, “India to double troops in Arunachal.”

<sup>14</sup> Brahma Chellaney, “Sino-Indian Border Tensions: Let the Facts Speak For Themselves,” *Daily News & Analysis (DNA)*, October 5, 2009, <http://chellaney.spaces.live.com/blog/cns!4913C7C8A2EA4A30!1114.entry>.

<sup>15</sup> Srinath Raghavan, “Chinese incursions a matter of perception,” *Deccan Chronicle*, September 18, 2009, <http://www.deccanchronicle.com/dc-comment/chinese-incursions-matter-perception-173>.

<sup>16</sup> “Chinese Incursions due to Different Perception: India,” *Express India*, February 23, 2008, <http://www.expressindia.com/latest-news/Chinese-incursions-due-to-different-perception-India/276320/>; “Chinese troops have not occupied Indian territory, says army chief,” *Rediff News*, February 23, 2010, <http://news.rediff.com/interview/2010/feb/23/indian-territory-not-occupied-by-chinese-troops.htm>.

In the first place, a rise in perceived incursions could be the innocuous result of increased Chinese activity – such as patrol frequency and infrastructure development – of the sort that has occurred on many of China’s borders, and not indicative of a change in Chinese policy.<sup>17</sup> In other words, India has picked up more noise than signal. Second, China’s anxiety over territorial integrity has sharpened in recent years. In 2008 and 2009, severe ethnic riots occurred in the supposedly autonomous regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. Aksai Chin offers a line of communication between the two. China also labels Arunachal Pradesh “South Tibet,” underscoring the symbolic importance of articulating a claim on that territory as part of a firm assertion that Tibet is an integral part of China. However, Taylor Fravel has argued that it is regime insecurity that “best explains China’s pattern of cooperation and delay in its territorial disputes,” because “China’s leaders have compromised when faced with internal threats to regime security.”<sup>18</sup> If correct, insecurity on the periphery should have led to Chinese caution. Srinath Raghavan offers an alternative interpretation, suggesting that China’s assertive stance on the ground is evidently intended “to buttress its position on the bargaining table,” after progress made in earlier rounds of negotiations made it appear that a settlement could be within reach.<sup>19</sup> In other words, success bred strife. Lastly, the pressure could be less innocuous. Irked by India’s growing closeness to the United States and other powers such as Japan, China may be looking to keep the parvenu off balance by virtually costless means.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Subcontinental Security Dilemma**

It is important that none of these three explanations imply, as is sometimes supposed, that Beijing has necessarily lowered the threshold for using force in pressing its claims. But the apparent friction on the frontier is significant. This is not because it necessarily presages Chinese adventurism, but rather due to its interaction with a much wider set of geopolitical dynamics taking place in South Asia. The mutual pressing of claims on the border generates opportunities for clashes, which can escalate to crises or worse. That is more likely in the prevailing milieu of mistrust, where the strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity declared in 2005 seems quite remote.

<sup>17</sup> “Interview with M. Taylor Fravel, on China’s border disputes,” *Rediff News*, October 13, 2009, <http://news.rediff.com/slide-show/2009/oct/13/slide-show-1-china-has-settled-all-land-border-disputes-except-with-india-and-bhutan.htm#contentTop>.

<sup>18</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, “Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China’s Compromises in Territorial Disputes,” *International Security*, vol. 30, no. 2 (October 1, 2005), p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> Raghavan, “Chinese incursions a matter of perception.”

<sup>20</sup> Harsh Pant, “China tightens the screws on India,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 2009.

A security dilemma stems from the impossibility of gauging with certainty the intentions of another state.<sup>21</sup> Supposedly defensive measures, being perceived as offensive in nature, result in a spiral of protective measures such as arms buildups and other efforts at balancing, resulting in a mutual diminishment of security. The looming and uncertain shadow of future growth, opacity in military planning, lingering historical grievances and the prevalence of mixed signals all sharpen the Sino-Indian dilemma, leading to the border dispute being refracted – most clearly in New Delhi – through a prism of acute mistrust.

In at least three areas, Sino-Indian rivalry has unfolded with speed unimaginable two decades ago, when India teetered on the cusp of default and China labored under the post-Tiananmen arms and economic embargoes. The contours of this competition are, by now, well known and will be outlined only briefly.

Diplomatically, Beijing has moved deftly to consolidate its influence in the Indian periphery. The core of this approach remains the Sino-Pakistan axis. “For China, Pakistan is a low-cost secondary deterrent to India,” argued Pakistani ambassador to the United States Husain Haqqani, and “for Pakistan, China is a high-value guarantor of security against India,” indeed its largest source of weaponry.<sup>22</sup> A congressional briefing reports that “China’s continuing role as a major arms supplier for Pakistan began in the 1960s and included helping to build a number of arms factories in Pakistan, as well as supplying complete weapons systems.”<sup>23</sup> These included knock-offs of Chinese ballistic missiles, warhead designs, and a full 50 kilograms of weapons grade uranium that dramatically accelerated Pakistan’s nuclearization.<sup>24</sup> China’s ongoing assistance to Pakistan’s plutonium production will “allow development of warheads with greater yield-to-weight ratios,” paving the way for miniaturization and hence more potent tactical nuclear weapons of the sort that paralyze India’s conventional options on its western front.<sup>25</sup> This is alongside

<sup>21</sup> For the classic statement, see Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, 1978, pp. 167–214.

<sup>22</sup> Jamal Afridi, “Backgrounder: China-Pakistan Relations,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 20, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/10070>.

<sup>23</sup> K. Alan Kronstadt and Kenneth Katzman, *India-Iran Relations and U.S. Interests* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, August 2, 2006), p. 47.

<sup>24</sup> “China’s Nuclear Exports and Assistance to Pakistan,” *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, November 14, 2003, <http://www.nti.org/db/china/npakpos.htm>; Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Threat of Pakistani Nuclear Weapons* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 8, 2001). For the claim regarding uranium transfers, see R. Jeffrey Smith and Joby Warrick, “Pakistani nuclear scientist’s accounts tell of Chinese proliferation,” *The Washington Post*, November 13, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/12/AR2009111211060.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Vipin Narang, “Posturing for Peace? Pakistan’s Nuclear Postures and South Asian Stability,” *International Security*, vol. 34, no. 3 (January 1, 2010), p. 58.

the extensive transfer of aircraft, including two squadrons of advanced J-10 fighters, which have blunted India's traditional air superiority.

Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan have also deepened their ties with China significantly. All are perceived by India to be within its traditional sphere of influence. In these states, though less so in Bangladesh, India has typically wielded considerable influence in domestic politics and demonstrated hostility to the involvement of extra-territorial powers. In Nepal, which shares an intentionally porous border with India, China's concerns over Tibetan activism rose after protests in 2008. Trade and travel links mushroomed, and political and military links have been carefully strengthened. India's former top counterterrorism official judges that "India will find itself in Nepal in a situation not dissimilar to the situation in Myanmar," in other words, "all the time having to compete with China for political influence and economic benefits [having once] monopolized the strategic playing field."<sup>26</sup> The intensity of this competition, and India's acute sense of being outpaced, explains why little has come of efforts to persuade India to pressure Myanmar on its human rights record. Elsewhere, Iran has afforded India a critical route to Central Asia, overland access being blocked by Pakistan. India has also established its only military base at Farkhor in Tajikistan, 2 kilometers from the Afghan border and from where it supplied the erstwhile Northern Alliance against the Pakistan-backed Taliban. This is less a Great Game than an ad hoc search for influence that has weighed heavily upon Delhi's thinking, even where it has clashed sharply with Washington's preferences on curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions or appeasing Pakistan's hostility to Indian activity in Afghanistan.

In the realm of energy, India has been repeatedly outmaneuvered by its neighbor across Central Asia, Africa, and its own periphery. Despite reversing its policy and moving closer to the military junta in Myanmar, it has lost access to resources even from projects in which it has a commercial stake.<sup>27</sup> China has become Bangladesh's largest source of arms, part of an effort to ensure overland energy routes into China.<sup>28</sup> Bangladesh's importance is also, however, maritime.

<sup>26</sup> B. Raman, "Rise of Maoists in Nepal: Implications for India," *Raman's strategic analysis*, August 10, 2008, [http://ramanstrategicanalysis.blogspot.com/2008\\_08\\_10\\_archive.html](http://ramanstrategicanalysis.blogspot.com/2008_08_10_archive.html); see also Jim Yardley, "China Intensifies Tug of War With India on Nepal," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2010, sec. International/Asia Pacific, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/18/world/asia/18nepal.html?scp=1&sq=India%20China%20nepal&st=cse>.

<sup>27</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, "China Secures Myanmar Energy Route," *Asia Times Online*, April 3, 2009, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/KD03Df03.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/KD03Df03.html); Simon Robinson, "India's Burma Silence Says Volumes," *Time*, September 29, 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1666859,00.html?xid=feed-cnn-topics>; R. Swaminathan, "India-Myanmar Relations: A Review," *South Asia Analysis Group*, October 30, 2009, <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/%5Cpapers35%5Cpaper3480.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Vijay Sakhuja, "China-Bangladesh Relations and Potential for Regional Tensions," *China Brief*, *The Jamestown Foundation*, vol. 9, no. 15 (July 23, 2009), [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=35310&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&Hash=f6f3b100c9](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35310&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&Hash=f6f3b100c9).

The “string of pearls” – supposedly “a nexus of Chinese geopolitical influence or military presence” along its stretched sea lines of communication<sup>29</sup> – is a now ubiquitous concept in the Indian strategic community. This reflects concerns that the Indian Ocean, once imagined as an “Indian lake,”<sup>30</sup> could be used as source of power projection against India, and that Indian sea lines could themselves be severed. Since more than 95 percent of Indian exports are seaborne, and 70 percent of Indian hydrocarbons are drilled in offshore blocks, this is deemed a vulnerability of strategic proportions.<sup>31</sup> The most prominent development is Gwadar, a Chinese-built port in the restive Pakistani province of Balochistan, but the list includes facilities or projects of varying scale at Marao in the Maldives, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Sittwe in Myanmar, Chittagong in Bangladesh, and in the Burmese Coco Islands.<sup>32</sup>

Jonathan Holslag argues that string of pearls thus far “appears to be more a chain of commercial ventures rather than military stepping-stones.” Although this is correct (and overlooked in the hyperventilation of some Indian accounts), it understates the inherently dual-use nature of naval facilities and the impossibility of precluding a future military function. The nature and scale of influence acquired by China is likely much more diffuse (in the sense of non-fungible) than observers have suggested, and India’s local maritime preeminence far greater.<sup>33</sup> But this has not lessened India’s long-term fears, and its nuclear and naval modernizations are both directed squarely at Beijing.

In 2008, India’s navy chief announced that “by 2022, we plan to have a 160-plus ship navy, including three aircraft carriers, 60 major combatants, including submarines and close to 400 aircraft of different types,” constituting “a formidable three dimensional force with satellite surveillance and networking.”<sup>34</sup> One study of Indian naval modernization has suggested that with a second landing platform and the appropriate air power, “India would be on the verge of possessing Asia’s only viable expeditionary naval force,” an obviously

<sup>29</sup> Christopher J. Pehrson, *String of Pearls: Meeting the Challenge of China’s Rising Power Across the Asian Littoral* (US Army War College: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), p. 3; Robert D. Kaplan, “Center Stage for the 21st Century: Power Plays in the Indian Ocean,” *Foreign Affairs* (April 2009). The term appears to have originated in a report by defense contractor Booz Allen Hamilton for the Pentagon.

<sup>30</sup> Emrys Chew, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: The Indian Ocean and the Maritime Balance of Power in Historical Perspective*, Working Paper Series (Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, October 25, 2007), p. 7, footnote 17.

<sup>31</sup> Holslag, “The Persistent Military Security Dilemma between China and India,” p. 825.

<sup>32</sup> Vikas Bajaj, “India Worries as China Builds Ports in South Asia,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2010, sec. Business/Global Business, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/business/global/16port.html?scp=9&sq=India%20china%20border&st=cse>.

<sup>33</sup> Holslag, “The Persistent Military Security Dilemma between China and India,” 830; Walter C. Ladwig, “Delhi’s Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, “Look East,” and India’s Emerging Influence in the Asia-Pacific,” *Asian Security*, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Shashank Joshi, “Sixty-five Thousand Tonnes of Ambition,” *Royal United Services Institute*, December 2009, <http://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C4B20EF703EDFF/>.

Sinocentric aspiration, buttressed by burgeoning ties to Japan, Australia, Singapore, and the U.S.<sup>35</sup>

A similar mentality characterizes the nuclear realm. Bharat Karnad, who participated in the writing of India's first draft (though unofficial) nuclear doctrine, affirms that India has set "the aim eventually of achieving near or at least notional parity with China as the basis for equitable security" and that its nuclear submarine and long-range missile projects are configured to this end. He adds that the imports of "American capital weapons and surveillance platforms are meant to beef up the Indian military for the coming strategic competition with China." "In time," warns Karnad, "Pakistan will become a sideshow."<sup>36</sup> To be sure, Karnad is an exceptionally hawkish voice amongst present and would-be decision-makers, but such perspectives are not without influence.

China has assumed center stage for a simple reason: its policies furnish Beijing (and, importantly, any future leadership there) with a repository of coercive levers that would, in the event of a conflict, render India vulnerable to commercial, diplomatic, and not inconceivably military pressure on the most sensitive points of the body politic.<sup>37</sup> The preponderance of China's rapid military buildup and attendant diplomatic moves are unambiguously directed eastwards to Taiwan, and the looming Sixth Fleet of the US Navy. China's embryonic maritime infrastructure, over which India frets, is a response to the former's own vulnerabilities: 62 percent of its own exports are seaborne, and 90 percent of its oil travels through the Indian Ocean, where the Malacca Straits constitute a severe choke point. Protecting these flows from disruption is critical to Chinese growth. Moreover, the sea-denial, anti-access naval posture cultivated by the PLA Navy over the years is aimed at suppressing any U.S. intervention across the Straits.<sup>38</sup> And the strategic trends emerging from within Chinese military circles – particularly the stress on network-centric warfare and unconventional tactics – are obviously configured to combat post-RMA American, much more than Indian, forces.

<sup>35</sup> Ladwig, "Delhi's Pacific Ambition: Naval Power, "Look East," and India's Emerging Influence in the Asia-Pacific," 10. The presence of such potent offensive platforms belies the occasional suggestion that non-state actors are the targets. And for all the talk of protecting the global commons, China is virtually the only state that India sees as presenting a threat to this nebulous concept. To be sure, the memory of 1971 – when the US was perceived to have engaged in nuclear coercion of India after sending the USS Enterprise to the Bay of Bengal during the Bangladesh War – is a lingering resentment, and has been explicitly invoked in discussions of the nuclear deterrent. But China is the most salient concern in India's naval circles, all the more so after nuclear weapons have tightly circumscribed the scope of any Indo-Pakistan war.

<sup>36</sup> Karnad, *India's Nuclear Policy*, p. 133.

<sup>37</sup> For a concise summary of this perspective, see Pant, "China Tightens the Screws on India," p. 39.

<sup>38</sup> Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, "Command of the Sea with Chinese Characteristics," *Orbis*, Autumn 2005, pp. 677–694; L. Goldstein and W. Murray, "Undersea Dragons: China's Maturing Submarine Force," *International Security*, 2004, pp. 161–196.

And yet, China's policy cannot but reduce India's security any more than, say, U.S. efforts at theater missile defense can avoid raising hackles in Moscow and Beijing.<sup>39</sup> That, of course, is the essence of a security dilemma and the essential context in which one ought to understand the border dispute. Indian insecurity and Chinese responses are superimposed on a preexisting flashpoint that is characterized by what one recent study sees as an "acutely strong sense of victimhood and its corollary, a sense of entitlement and recovery" on both sides.<sup>40</sup> Despite the explosion in trade and institutional links, one study of opinion polls, publications and official documents concludes that "mutual perceptions are marked with ambivalence and distrust," in contrast to the governments' rhetoric.<sup>41</sup>

### **Indian Insecurity**

A handful of other recent geopolitical shifts have darkened the picture further.

First, India has developed no effective answer to the problem of state-sponsored and state-sanctioned terrorism prosecuted from behind a hair-trigger nuclear shield.<sup>42</sup> Diplomatic pressure from the United States is thwarted by the superpower's reliance on Islamabad as a "major non-NATO ally" and staging post for Afghanistan, as well as the precarious position of Pakistan that renders it "too big to fail" and hence too vulnerable to coerce. Indian efforts to craft a flexible military response allowing for rapid thrusts under the nuclear threshold and before diplomacy can kick in – the 'Cold Start' doctrine – have floundered, both for reasons of institutional lethargy (efficient procurement is frequently crippled) but also Pakistan's aggressive nuclear force posture, a stance that credibly threatens the first use of tactical nuclear weapons against even a limited Indian conventional attack.

India's impotence in the face of an adversary that continues to maintain extensive ties to terrorists and insurgents, including the growing Lashkar-e-Taiba, creates substantial domestic costs for any governmental inaction,

<sup>39</sup> Kier A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The Rise of US nuclear Primacy," *Foreign Affairs* (April 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Miller, "Re-collecting Empire."

<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Holslag, "Progress, Perceptions and Peace in the Sino-Indian Relationship," *East Asia*, vol. 26, no. 1 (March 1, 2009), pp. 41–56. For a more sanguine view, see Andrew Shearer and Fergus Hanson, "Not unpopular in China," *Pragati: The Indian National Interest Review*, January 2010, <http://pragati.nationalinterest.in/2010/01/not-unpopular-in-china/>.

<sup>42</sup> C. Christine Fair, *U.S.-Pakistan Relations: Assassination, Instability, and the Future of U.S. Policy*, 2008; Ashley J. Tellis, *Bad Company - Lashkar e-Tayyiba and the Growing Ambition of Islamist Militancy in Pakistan*, 2010, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=40330>; Sumit Ganguly and Devin T. Hagerty, *Fearful Symmetry: India-Pakistan Crises in the Shadow of Nuclear Weapons* (University of Washington Press, 2005); Sumit Ganguly and S. Paul Kapur, eds., *Nuclear Proliferation in South Asia: Crisis Behaviour and the Bomb*, *Asian Security Studies* (London: Routledge, 2008).

imposed by a vibrant media and vocal middle class. These pressures only fuel military concern over a two-front war in which India would reportedly be forced to adopt a South Asian *Schlieffen Plan* of sorts, for which it is woefully ill equipped. Preparation for a two-front conflict is not a new development, of course, but its invocation by officials indicates a sharper focus on its possibility.

Second, the entente with the United States has lost momentum since the high-points of the defense and nuclear agreements in 2005.<sup>43</sup> This began with the Obama administration's (quickly jettisoned) willingness to intervene in what India regards as the bilateral Kashmir dispute. The tension continued with a poorly phrased joint Sino-American communiqué in November 2009 that seemed to encourage a Chinese role in South Asia.<sup>44</sup> And it was inflamed further by anxiety that the United States has been apathetic towards Pakistan-backed efforts to evict India from Afghanistan, where it had staked major political capital in backing the Karzai regime, and where the recent emphasis on negotiation with the Taliban looks to empower Pakistani proxies and embolden affiliated anti-Indian militants. What frightens New Delhi (and, for that matter, Moscow) the most is the prospect of a G2, a Sino-American condominium that would dilute American efforts to balance with India and ease the way for regional hegemony "with Chinese characteristics."

Third, this last concern is amplified by the sense that India and China are on divergent growth paths that will compound China's fifteen-year lead in double-digit growth, entrench its domination of labor-intensive global manufacturing and other commanding heights of the global economy, and highlight the plethora of obstacles – governance, human capital, and internal security – that blight the former. This fear was compounded by the widespread downgrading of Indian growth forecasts in mid-2011, and the low probability of further economic reforms. Each clash on the border, each squadron of aircraft shipped to Pakistan, and each announcement of a new Chinese port development interact with one another to calcify a security dilemma that confounds the largely cooperative rhetoric emanating from public officials. The challenge for India is to ensure that the steps it takes to moderate its vulnerabilities do not induce tit-for-tat responses that would herald a spiral in which India could only come off the worse.

### Sources of Stability

One speculative account of India's likely trajectory concluded that "a renewed military conflict with China over the contested Indian state of

<sup>43</sup>S. Paul Kapur and Sumit Ganguly, "The Transformation of U.S.-India Relations: An Explanation for the Rapprochement and Prospects for the Future," *Asian Survey* vol. 47, no. 4 (August 2007), pp. 642–656. Kapur.

<sup>44</sup>Manoj Joshi, "Obama's Beijing kowtow," *Mail Today*, November 24, 2009, <http://mjoshi.blogspot.com/2009/11/obama-kowtows-in-beijing.html>.

Arunachal Pradesh cannot be ruled out,” adding that “India is set for interesting times.”<sup>45</sup> Another writer suggests that “China may act to preempt, or respond to, an announcement of the Dalai Lama’s chosen successor in India – particularly in Tawang – by deploying the People’s Liberation Army to occupy contested territory along the Sino-Indian border, as occurred in 1962, creating a risk of military conflict between the now nuclear-armed Asian giants.”<sup>46</sup>

While pessimists have a case, the first point to note is that India and China are not, as is increasingly suggested, in a Cold War. There is almost no trace of ideological rivalry. The Indo-Pakistan and U.S.-Soviet conflicts threatened the very identity of each state. Pakistan, as a home for South Asia’s Muslims, could not be but threatened by secular India’s ability to encompass large numbers of that minority; nor could the latter recognize the ideological legitimacy of Pakistan’s founding without acknowledging some deficiency in its own political philosophy. Concessions of expedience become more costly and negative images of the adversary quickly harden.

The same cannot be said of the Sino-Indian pairing, where both countries have known for decades that, to paraphrase Deng, it does not matter what color the cat is as long as it catches mice. India continues to shed its statist economic legacy and China is, in many ways, amongst the most open economies in Asia. A pragmatic tradition of foreign policy in India means that its government is indifferent towards the autocratic nature of Party rule in Beijing. China feels little threat from India’s chaotic and often dysfunctional political system. Nor does either country’s foreign policy exhibit a proselytizing streak. Their enmity being strategic, and not ideological, is all the more tractable.

This also means that alliance dynamics are suppler, since third parties can align so as to create a balance of power without prejudice to their own identities. It would have been unthinkable for a representative British government of the 1950s to freely ally with the Soviet Union. This raised the incentives to use force if the balance of power appeared to be shifting adversely. Though Asian states are enmeshed in many historical grievances, there is no reason to suppose that they will inevitably line up alongside or against either India or China. This is particularly so, given that the latter are neither strong enough to maintain meaningful clients (as the United States was with Japan) nor willing to form rigid alliances of the sort that India, in particular, shunned during the Cold War. This generates strong pressures for each state to be wary of alienating regional actors or taking precipitous action. Perhaps what is most unlike a Cold War is that the relationship is so

<sup>45</sup> “The Indian Century,” *Financial Times*, January 3, 2010, sec. Lex, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/3/be90dd4c-f88a-11de-beb8-00144feab49a,s01=1.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Dan Twining, “Could China and India go to war over Tibet?,” *Foreign Policy*, [http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/03/10/could\\_china\\_and\\_india\\_go\\_to\\_war\\_over\\_tibet](http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/03/10/could_china_and_india_go_to_war_over_tibet).

lopsided. William Overholt pointedly, though exaggeratedly, writes that “China pays so little attention to India that the subject doesn’t arise in most foreign-policy or security discussions.”<sup>47</sup>

Equally important, a Sino-Indian war remains exceedingly unlikely. This is for a host of economic, institutional, and military reasons. In the decade after 1997, bilateral trade rocketed from 1.6 to 38.7 billion dollars (roughly 50 per cent annually).<sup>48</sup> In 2008, it surpassed 50 billion dollars.<sup>49</sup> This makes China the third largest export market for India and its single largest source of imports. Jairam Ramesh, a prominent Indian politician and former commerce secretary, coined the portmanteau term “Chindia” to denote the degree of interdependence between the two economies. Near double-digit growth rates are deemed in India and China to underpin (respectively) electoral success and political legitimacy, and even the most limited of conflicts would place these at risk.<sup>50</sup> Even with high private savings rates in both countries (and trade accounting for just a fifth of Indian output), their economies are vulnerable to disruption. One academic also observes that “large numbers of young Indian students in China as also an ever increasing number of small-time, small-town business travelers have lately emerged as a new pro-China lobby in India.”<sup>51</sup>

Of course, the historical record clearly demonstrates that neither economic costs nor the political fallout of economic disruption are by themselves sufficient disincentives to armed force.<sup>52</sup> The more important cost is likely that which would be incurred to the Chinese doctrine of peaceful rise. Beijing’s three-decade-old foreign policy of reticence would suffer irreparable damage in the event of hostilities. This would ease Asian distrust of Japan, and encourage a more overt balancing coalition to form. Almost nothing could be more corrosive to the state’s grand strategy.

Unlike 1962, the Sino-Indian relationship is also overlaid with a set of semi-institutional ties. Many of these were motivated by recognition of the possibility of miscalculation. After a standoff in the Sumdorong Chu Valley in 1987 involving 200,000 troops, both governments resumed negotiations on a

<sup>47</sup> William H. Overholt, *Asia, America, and the Transformation of Geopolitics* (New York: Cambridge University Press and RAND, 2008), 198.

<sup>48</sup> Holslag, “The Persistent Military Security Dilemma between China and India,” p. 812.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Wonacott, “Downturn Heightens China-India Tension on Trade,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123749113639187441.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Minxin Pei, “Will the Chinese Communist Party Survive the Crisis? How Beijing’s Shrinking Economy May Threaten One-Party Rule,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 12, 2009, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/64862/minxin-pei/will-the-chinese-communist-party-survive-the-crisis>.

<sup>51</sup> Swaran Singh, “India-China Relations: Perception, Problems, Potential,” *South Asian Survey*, 2008, p. 86.

<sup>52</sup> Katherine Barbieri, *The Liberal Illusion: Does Trade Promote Peace?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002). For an alternative view, see the nuanced Erik Gartzke, Quan Li, and Charles Boehmer, “Investing in the Peace: Economic Interdependence and International Conflict,” *International Organization*, 2001, pp. 391–438.

more urgent footing.<sup>53</sup> Since 2005, there have been thirteen rounds of talks between special representatives. In 2006, these produced a far-reaching agreement that “virtually spelt out the contours of a border settlement on the basis of a mutual exchange of claims.”<sup>54</sup> India’s representative in 2009, who later became the country’s National Security Adviser, stated that that “round of talks . . . was the best that I have had in the nine rounds that I have held.”<sup>55</sup> In 2006, the Nathu La pass connecting Sikkim and Tibet opened for trade over four decades after it was sealed. It is also of note that the Indian government is far more reticent about the border than local officials or the press, and is cognizant that if China were truly upping the ante, there is a great deal more that the latter could do.

In 2009, the year in which the border caught much public attention, a hotline was established between the Indian and Chinese premiers. This, along with high-level military exchanges and joint war games, somewhat insulates the dispute from misunderstandings or misperception, lowering the prospect of a crisis that might escalate. Jonathan Holslag has written that “both sides have made progress to allow the border zone to look less like a battlefield” and “in the Eastern Sector, border meetings have become routine and less tense.”<sup>56</sup> It is an imperative for both governments to continue to develop this infrastructure of détente and, importantly, use it intensively.

The mutual possession of nuclear weapons precludes anything other than a clash circumscribed in time, space, and scale (though India perceives its nuclear capabilities against China to be still embryonic).<sup>57</sup> Audience costs on both sides have only risen in recent decades, creating powerful and credible signs of resolve that would deter the initiation of force to capture disputed territory outright. That constraint that has only tightened for the Indian

<sup>53</sup> John W. Garver, “Sino-Indian Rapprochement and the Sino-Pakistan Entente,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Summer 1996, pp. 340–343.

<sup>54</sup> Manoj Joshi, “Narayanan’s Firing is a Good Time to Ring in Change,” *Mail Today*, March 13, 2010, <http://mjoshi.blogspot.com/2010/01/narayanans-firing-is-good-time-to-ring.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Karan Thapar, “Interview with National Security Adviser MK Narayanan,” *IBN Live*, September 20, 2009, <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/devils-advocate-india-doesnt-have-china-complex-nsa/101823-3-p2.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Holslag, “The Persistent Military Security Dilemma between China and India,” p. 817.

<sup>57</sup> Scott Douglas Sagan and Kenneth Neal Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2003); Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon*, Cornell studies in security affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Sumit Ganguly, “Nuclear Stability in South Asia,” *International Security* vol. 33, no. 2 (October 1, 2008), pp. 45–70; S. Paul Kapur, “Revisionist Ambitions, Conventional Capabilities, and Nuclear Instability: Why Nuclear South Asia is Not Like Cold War Europe,” in *Inside Nuclear South Asia*, ed. Scott Douglas Sagan (Stanford, Calif: Stanford Security Studies, 2009); Dinshaw Mistry, “Tempering Optimism about Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia,” *Security Studies*, 2009, p. 148.

government after feeble responses to major terrorist attacks in 2002 and 2008, and Beijing surely knows it.

Above all, the most likely theater of operations is not amenable to rapid or simple offensive operations. Although China enjoys a superior position in some ways, holding higher and less punishing ground, and supported with more extensive and reliable lines of communications to the rear in both sectors, the balance is radically different to that which prevailed in 1962.<sup>58</sup> The regular incursions emphasize the mobility of Chinese forces at high altitudes, and the 13<sup>th</sup> Group Army – directed at Tibet and the border with Myanmar – “has developed into a modern rapid reaction force with enhanced logistical capacity, mobile artillery, air defense, communication and intelligence, special forces and intensive training in warfare under exceptional conditions, such as high altitude combat.”<sup>59</sup>

This, and the associated “extensive network of roads, railheads, forward airfields, pipelines and logistic hubs,” contrasts sharply with India’s own lethargic preparations.<sup>60</sup> These gathered pace only after 2005, and Indian forces continue to maintain a firepower-reliant defensive strategy that is hampered by a long-standing lack of light artillery, inadequate logistics, limited airlift capacity, and a diversion of resources to worsening domestic insurgencies. Around 2020, China will likely possess more fourth-generation fighter aircraft than the entire IAF fleet. The Lanzhou and Chengdu military regions adjacent to India host five PLAAF divisions including approximately 300 aircraft.

Nonetheless, Indian accounts exaggerate the offensive orientation of China’s posture and frequently overlook the weaknesses of the light infantry on the Chinese side of the border. Moreover, the costs of anything beyond a skirmish have risen enormously. Whereas air power played no role in 1962, any major clash would likely find Indian Air Force assets involved in ground support and air-denial operations from a series of upgraded air bases stretching from Arunachal Pradesh, to Assam, to West Bengal.<sup>61</sup> As the military balance equilibrates, deterrence stability ought to rise accordingly.

<sup>58</sup> Vijay Sakhuja, “Military Buildup Across the Himalayas: A Shaky Balance,” *China Brief, The Jamestown Foundation* vol. 9, no. 18 (September 10, 2009), [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=35469&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=255e0ccfe7](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35469&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=25&cHash=255e0ccfe7); Krishnan, *India’s Security Dilemma vis-à-vis China: A Case of Optimum or Sub-Optimum Restraint?*, p. 3. For details of 1962, see Daniel P. Marston; Chandar S. Sundaram and Daniel P. Marston, eds., *A Military History of India and South Asia: From the East India Company to the Nuclear Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), chap. 11.

<sup>59</sup> Holslag, “The Persistent Military Security Dilemma between China and India,” p. 819.

<sup>60</sup> Sakhuja, “Military Buildup Across the Himalayas: A Shaky Balance.”

<sup>61</sup> *India’s Security Dilemma vis-à-vis China: A Case of Optimum or Sub-Optimum Restraint?*, pp. 48–50.

## Implications and Trajectories

The Sino-Indian relationship comprises many moving parts. The likelihood of armed coexistence slipping into armed conflict or, conversely, that coexistence growing less armed and more cooperative, depends on a number of factors.

First, Chinese policy is partly a function of developments within Tibet. The journalist Raja Mohan argues that one of “the iron laws of Sino-Indian relations” is that “when there is relative tranquility in Tibet, India and China have reasonably good relations,” and “when Sino-Tibetan tensions rise, India’s relationship with China heads south.”<sup>62</sup> India unequivocally recognizes Tibet’s status as Chinese territory and places tight restrictions on the political activities of the Dalai Lama. The toleration of his visit to Tawang in 2009 came only after it was deemed that China’s posturing on Arunachal Pradesh had spiked. India faces a painful choice between its support for the government-in-exile on the one hand, and going to extreme lengths to assuage Chinese apprehension, perhaps even “some move by India to curb the Tibetan émigrés – possibly by dissolving the parliament-in-exile.”<sup>63</sup>

A middle ground, where India preserves the option to “unleash” dissident forces in a time of crisis, is only superficially attractive for Delhi. Its use would likely prompt an impossible clash and do little to substantively weaken China’s long-term grip over Tibet. India’s fulsome reaction to flawed elections in Afghanistan and Iran, and its sensitivity to the Myanmar junta, demonstrate that its foreign policy is more than able to operate on firmly realist principles. It is not clear whether it is truly within India’s means to prompt China to abandon its claim to Tawang, but India stands to gain the most from finding a settlement on the bargaining range. It remains an eminent possibility, though, that the fortunes of the borderlands – where China sees its reputation and integrity at stake – will be hostages to the status of Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet, in ways that neither India nor the United States can hope to control.

What is important is divesting the dispute of symbolic value as much as is possible. This requires more coordinated Indian public diplomacy to correct the plethora of inaccurate and sensationalist media reports. It was only in the 1980s – after perceived Indian intransigence over an east-west territorial swap – that Tawang became a sticking point for China. Just how much of China’s stance is tactical, to force Indian concessions in the more-valued west, will only be revealed through dialogue. Particularly for India, progressing in that dialogue, and securing the constitutional amendment that might be required

<sup>62</sup> C. Raja Mohan, “India’s Tibet ambiguity,” *Indian Express*, November 27, 2008, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/India-s-Tibet-ambiguity/391206>.

<sup>63</sup> Raghavan, “Resolving the Sino-Indian Boundary Dispute.”

for any settlement, requires a smoother handling of perceptions and sentiment at home, and a downplaying of Aksai Chin.

Second, the security dilemma is an uneven one. “China is still perceived more suspiciously than the other way around,” which is hardly surprising given the economic, political and military imbalance.<sup>64</sup> The Indo-U.S. rapprochement that began in 2005 and effectively legitimized India’s nuclear arsenal was an important step in assuaging India’s claim to be recognized as a peer of China rather than Pakistan, but, as demonstrated above, Indo-U.S. ties have weakened under the Obama administration. This has not only pushed India towards Russia, both sharing acute concerns about the trajectory of NATO’s strategy in Afghanistan, but has also reactivated the Indian strategic establishment’s longstanding distrust of US intentions and perception of Washington as an unreliable partner.

Extensive arms sales continue to lubricate the relationship, and India likely welcomed the short-term diplomatic fallout of the U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan in 2010. But Washington continues to place the Sino-Indian dyad at the inadvertent periphery of its Pakistan and Iran policies, running roughshod over India’s interests for short-term gains in Afghanistan and tactically, but largely unsuccessfully, courting Delhi when the occasion demands. It might be argued that stability in Kabul and containment in Tehran are the more pressing aims for U.S. diplomacy, but this is myopic. It underestimates both the degree to which India will play an influential role in key present and future domains of U.S. policy (as facilitator but also, it should not be forgotten, spoiler) and the implications of a Sino-Indian conflagration. What is at stake is not territory at the cusp of the Tibetan Plateau, but the strategic balance in Asia.

“America’s military penchant towards the South Asian juggernaut,” it has been argued, “makes China very uncomfortable,” generating “strategic apprehension.”<sup>65</sup> This misunderstands the dynamic. It is China that has increased uncertainty on the border, even if inadvertently, whereas India has not vocally raised its claim to Aksai Chin despite both an extant parliamentary resolution that demands the whole territory and presently piqued public opinion. As on its border with Pakistan, India today appears the status quo power. It is also India that bears the bulk of apprehension. American reassurance – carefully calibrated – could pave the way for greater calm on the border and the temporary trust necessary for a settlement.

Third, the most likely trajectory of Sino-Indian relations remains the perpetuation of armed coexistence. Recurrent crises – whether on the border or, as with the reported forced surfacing of an Indian submarine, at sea – will be managed through intensive dialogue and ample issue linkage, so as to emphasize the costs of employing force. The merits of this approach should

<sup>64</sup> Jonathan Holslag, *China and India: Prospects for Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 815.

<sup>65</sup> Holslag, “The Persistent Military Security Dilemma between China and India,” p. 836.

not be underestimated: unlike Pakistan, neither side has in the recent period resorted to the use of non-state groups for subversive purposes. The last armed clash was nearly a quarter century ago. Each side's nuclear posture credibly declares no first use, and the maturation of India's nuclear triad will further dampen India's fears. Though imbalanced, Sino-Indian trade is growing rapidly. Unlike the regimes in Tehran or Islamabad, both governments remain pragmatic in style and developmental in their focus. Areas of mutual concern – stability in Afghanistan, a moderation of American power, freedom of the seas, and climate change – lie dormant as fruitful grounds for incremental cooperation, but this remains dulled by the considerable weight of mutual suspicion.

