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The Sino-Indian Clash and the New Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific

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Cover photo: BentheCM/Flickr. Sino-Indian border, July 2016.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Shifting Regional Dynamics	4
Not to be Missed: An Opportunity for Convergence	5
Connectivity	8
Maritime	11
Conclusion and Recommendations	14

INTRODUCTION

On June 18, 2017, an Indian patrol disrupted construction of a Chinese road along the disputed border of Sikkim, a remote state in northeast India, reigniting a border conflict between China and India. The Kingdom of Bhutan, which borders Sikkim, where the construction was taking place, had formally objected to Chinese construction in the disputed area and had hoped to pursue a potential trade-off deal as a settlement. Bhutan had achieved agreement in principle regarding this general area with China ten years earlier by exchanging acreage in the high Himalayas adjoining China for pasture areas in Doklam.¹

This June 2017 incident rapidly evolved into a standoff, with the apparent threat of militarized escalation between China and India. The tension dissipated without consensus on the substantive issues, but under an interim diplomatic arrangement whereby India withdrew troops and China halted its road building, thus ending a seventy-one-day impasse.

The Doklam border dispute has yet to reach a solution; far from being an isolated incident, it mirrors a long history of disputes along the nearly 4,000 km Sino-Indian border. Unlike previous disputes, however, the recent standoff occurred along the “Line of Actual Control” stretching between Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh—both of which China claims and one of which (Aksai Chin) it has occupied since Pakistan ceded this part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir decades ago. The Doklam dispute differs in another respect because of the involvement of a third country, Bhutan,² whose relationship with India remains essentially that of a client state. Bhutan’s foreign policy must, in accordance with the terms of its independence, be aligned with that of India. A third difference emerges from the particularly strategic nature of the contested territory. India fears that a Chinese permanent presence in, or easy access to Doklam, could threaten access to the very narrow strip of land known as the Chicken’s Neck at Siliguri, which connects India’s mainland to Meghalaya and

another six of its northeastern states. Yet another differentiating factor lies in the timing of the standoff, simultaneous with an increasingly assertive Chinese policy of expansionism across the Indo-Pacific region.

Despite the easing of immediate tensions over Doklam, China and India have made no adjustments to their territorial claims. From New Delhi, the perception of Chinese intentions and use of language regarding Doklam seems to reflect a pattern employed in both the South China and East China Seas. In this view, China appears to be attempting to change the status quo either by force or by assertiveness backed by force, all aimed at creating new facts on the ground. In Bhutan, a road became the instrument of expansion. In the South China Sea, China has reclaimed more than 3,200 acres of land, transforming disputed reefs and rocky outcrops into islands—some of these new islands now host military facilities.

“Despite the easing of immediate tensions over Doklam, China and India have made no adjustments to their territorial claims.”

Overall, China claims about ninety percent of the South China Sea. This percentage eludes precision because Beijing uses an ambiguously defined “nine-dash line” which refers to the demarcation line between the claims of the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of China in the South China Sea. These claims have been fully discredited: The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) International Tribunal at The Hague rejected all Chinese claims and positions in July 2016 (although China refused to litigate a case brought by the Philippines);³ the Beijing government

1 Treaty Series, “Convention Between Great Britain and China Relating to Sikkim and Tibet,” Foreign and Commonwealth Office, March 17, 1890, <http://treaties.fco.gov.uk/docs/pdf/1894/TS0011.pdf>.

2 Jeff Smith, “High noon in the Himalayas: Behind the China- India Standoff at Doka La,” *War on the Rocks*, July 13, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/07/high-noon-in-the-himalayas-behind-the-china-india-standoff-at-doka-la/>.

3 Matikas Santos, “Philippines wins arbitration case vs. China over South China Sea,” *Global Nation Inquirer*, July 12, 2016, <http://>

rejects the court's finding—a move incompatible with China's accession to the UNCLOS in 1994 but consistent with the indisputable Chinese sovereignty claimed by Beijing.

Similarly, little opening appears to exist in the tangle of conflicting national positions about ultimate sovereignty in parts of the East China Sea. Beijing disputes Japan's claims to the Senkaku Islands, which are called Diaoyu in Chinese. Following World War II and into the 1970s, Beijing occasionally raised pro forma objections to the transfer of the islands' administrative control to Tokyo, but indications of displeasure have risen in recent decades. For the past several years, China has dispatched coast guard vessels and military aircraft to the air and sea zones adjacent to the islands, which represent, in Japan's view, an attempt to disrupt Tokyo's ability to administer the territories. The pace of increased competition in the area can be measured by the number of announced occasions (1,168) on which Japan scrambled its fighter jets in 2016.⁴

The language Beijing uses to speak about the Doklam dispute mirrors that employed to buttress China's claims in the South and East China Seas. At a June 28, 2017 press conference, for example, China's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang explained that, "Doklam has been a part of China since ancient times. It does not belong to Bhutan, still less, India . . . China's construction of roads in Doklam is an act of sovereignty on its own territory."⁵ In the South China Sea, China claims "indisputable sovereignty since ancient times."⁶

The convergence of these views, coupled with a disinclination to accept procedures (as in the UNCLOS rulings), make it difficult to welcome China's re-emergence as a great power and its current effort to become a global maritime power. Those following China's behavior across the pan-Asian arc realize that these displays of assertiveness coincide with and reflect momentum behind President Xi Jinping's determination to consolidate power at the Nineteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which convened on October 18, 2017. Nearly all national security issues and policy must be viewed through that prism.

Restoring national sovereignty after a "century of humiliation"⁷ is crucial to the perceived legitimacy of the Communist Party in China. Assertiveness along its border areas fits into this determination, leading some to hope for an easing of pressure after Xi won endorsement for another five years in power. As mentioned above, the 1890 British convention on the borders of then-British India and then-Manchu-ruled China underlie the Doklam dispute. By common assent, the convention represents badly flawed and imprecise colonial era mapmaking, equally imposed on the Indian subjects of the British Empire and a weak Chinese state. Even more than in the South China Sea, the lines are ambiguous and subject to different reasonable interpretations by both India and China. Thus, a political resolution balancing the respective claims should be the ultimate outcome.

Some see the respective disputes as exemplifying a Chinese penchant for irredentism—for losses real or imagined—of any territory China has coveted over the past 5,000 years or over which it has exercised temporary dominion. This perspective fails to consider a parallel Chinese strategy of accommodation with claimants who have differing ideas about where to draw the line; for example, the succession of territorial boundary agreements with the independent states emerging from the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), including areas in which the former USSR and China had fought wars. Similarly, no one can gainsay Vietnam's resistance to China's maritime sovereignty claims. Yet during the 1990s, Hanoi and Beijing reached agreement on land frontiers over which China had fought a punitive war against Vietnam in 1979.

Clearly, an aggressive or at least assertive tendency by China vis-à-vis border disputes with its neighbors does not apply without exception, but it is a prominent current trend of President Xi Jinping's administration. Along the western Pacific and the long Himalayan barrier, political goodwill and trust in China is in short supply as Beijing presses the territorial issue. But this is not the case at all times and everywhere. The key to smoother relations seems to be a willingness to remain sufficiently attentive to China's interests and preferred

globalnation.inquirer.net/140358/philippines-arbitration-decision-maritime-dispute-south-china-sea-arbitral-tribunal-unclos-itlos.

4 Jesse Johnson, "Japan's fighter jet scrambles set new record in 2016 amid surging Chinese military activity," *Japan Times*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/04/14/national/japans-fighter-jet-scrambles-set-new-record-2016-amid-surg-ing-chinese-military-activity/#.WZ3LM2epV9A>.

5 Namrata Goswami, "Can China be Taken Seriously on its 'Word' to Negotiate Disputed Territory?," *Diplomat*, August 18, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/08/can-china-be-taken-seriously-on-its-word-to-negotiate-disputed-territory/>.

6 Xinhua Net, "China has indisputable sovereignty over South China Sea islands," Xinhua, April 29, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-04/29/c_135322815.htm.

7 Matt Schiavenza "How Humiliation Drove Modern Chinese History," *Atlantic*, October 25, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/10/how-humiliation-drove-modern-chinese-history/28078/>.

outcomes—behavior perhaps in keeping with that of a tributary state.

In South Asia the opposite sentiment applies. India increasingly fears encirclement by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a convenient label for ongoing Chinese financed development and infrastructure, which significantly increases China's presence in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, prominent figures in Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines have expressed growing concern about measures such as China's island building in disputed waters.

The above-noted assertiveness has affected regional dynamics to such an extent that India appears impelled to reconsider its long-standing posture of strategic autonomy to safeguard its own territorial interests. India remains strongly attuned to a nonaligned posture, due in part to its colonial experience under the British Empire. The core idea developed from a vision of India steering its way between the two superpowers while striving toward a more just world order. This ideological doctrine had become second nature in Delhi, as it guided India's foreign policy for several decades after independence and throughout the Cold War. In today's shifting global power dynamics, however, India, like China, stands to benefit from an enhanced role in the international system—though China's ambitions seem to reach beyond that of a mere regional power.

In service to this view of a fundamentally changing world order, the current National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has initiated a paradigm shift in its approach to the world and now seeks strategic autonomy outside of conventional nonalignment. In 2015, Foreign Minister Subramanyam Jaishankar announced that India intended to act as a leading, rather than balancing, power on the regional and global stage. Though growing faster than China, India's gross domestic product (GDP) of \$2.264 trillion remains more than four times smaller than Chinese GDP of \$11.2 trillion. Similarly, India's defense spending of \$52.2 billion (2016-17) is more than three times smaller than that of China (\$146.6 billion). Measured in these terms, an Indian effort to counterbalance China will fall short—unless it opts for an Indo-Pacific regional coalition.

The remainder of this paper recommends this approach as the only plausible option available to India. It also suggests that adroit moves by US policy makers can capitalize on these changing Asian power dynamics (a) to forge stronger ties with India and (b) to thread in other Indo-Pacific states in ways that counterbalance Chinese influence while bolstering Indian interests—interests with which the United States has little or no quarrel. Existing levels of US-India interaction and cooperation should be expanded in the following domains: connectivity, maritime control and influence, dynamic defense partnership, as well as augmenting convergent economic competitiveness.

SHIFTING REGIONAL DYNAMICS

The recent border standoff in Doklam represents one of several recent border incidents between India and China. In July 2017, Chinese troops also crossed the Line of Control in Uttarakhand, expelling a group of shepherds. In another episode, coincident with the Doklam dispute, Indian troops intercepted Chinese soldiers in the Ladakh area of Kashmir.

In India's historical memory, the only Chinese war that matters occurred in 1962: a humiliation in which Chinese forces unilaterally vacated ground they had won from India to retire to positions previously held. It demonstrated the deficient status of India's military and resulted in China's annexation of the Aksai Chin region. The legacy of the war still casts a dark shadow over Indian views of China. Before the Vietnam conflict consumed American policy making, important cooperative efforts emerged, which linked to India's anxiety about China. That period seems reminiscent of the current era—one in which India has become steadily more apprehensive about Chinese intentions in both the economic and foreign policy spheres. Thus, India views the signature Belt and Road Initiative with scarcely disguised suspicion and mistrust.

The BRI has become the centerpiece of Xi Jinping's efforts to provide public goods while expanding Chinese influence and stature, in ways analogous to the US Marshall Plan after WWII.⁸ It is a vision that shifts the locus of the world order from a US-centered, transatlantic system to a Eurasian system, with China at the core. The BRI envisions the reconnection of sixty-five countries in Eurasia via a series of roads, railways, ports, and other infrastructure. In some ways, the BRI is a repackaging of existing Chinese aid and investment projects. This assessment is based on the fact that the BRI aims at absorbing China's industrial overcapacity and sustaining its current state-owned enterprises as much as shaping the global economic order.

China has already pledged some \$100 billion in infrastructure projects, although how much of that

has been realized remains to be seen. Chinese state entities have made more than \$200 billion in dubious loans that it may never recover to troubled nations like Venezuela, Zimbabwe, and Sudan; some analysts fear infrastructure loans in corrupt, unstable parts of Central Asia may suffer a similar fate. If fully realized, the BRI would be a more than \$1 trillion project.⁹

Perhaps because of the magnitude of the project and its geopolitical consequence, New Delhi elected to boycott the Belt and Road Summit in May 2017. The ostensible cause was an objection to the placement of infrastructure projects, notably the known objectives of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is set to pass through the Gilgit-Baltistan region—territory that Delhi sees as sovereign to India. But India's objections go well beyond the CPEC, seeing the BRI as basically exclusionary to Indian economic interests in the region and beyond. The BRI reinforces old suspicions about an intentional encirclement of India, with significant Chinese investment in India's neighbors.

In this climate and with these views, the border concerns and economic insecurity, coupled with Chinese assertiveness in East and Southeast Asia, have raised anxiety levels among Indian policy makers. Giving substance to these concerns, Prime Minister Modi has increasingly shifted India away from strategic autonomy, developing closer partnerships with Israel, Japan, Vietnam, the United States, and others—notwithstanding the clutch of interests that bind each of these countries to maintain at least cordial relations with Beijing. Yet Modi's moves capitalize on steadily expanding US-India defense cooperation, now at the broadest and closest level ever (despite Indian irritation at residual US dealings with Pakistan). Conditions have never been more propitious for what could, in effect, become a comfortable and mutually beneficial defense partnership between the United States and India—a partnership that could serve as a balance of powers in the pan-Asian context.

8 Simon Shen, "How China's 'Belt and Road' Compares to the Marshall Plan," *Diplomat*, February 6, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/02/how-chinas-belt-and-road-compares-to-the-marshall-plan/>.

9 Jane Perlez and Yufan Huang, "Behind China's \$1 Trillion Plan to Shake up the Economic Order," *New York Times*, May 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/13/business/china-railway-one-belt-one-road-1-trillion-plan.html?mcubz=0>.



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NOT TO BE MISSED: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CONVERGENCE

The evidence of closer defense coordination and arms sales has become irrefutable. The United States approved the sale of twenty-two Guardian drones in late June 2017; India wants lethal variants as well. India and the United States have continued their vastly significant Joint Working Group on Aircraft Carrier Technology Cooperation, while India seems set to become the first foreign country to purchase the Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS) from the United States. It is expected that technology exchange talks will commence soon, as India seeks to modernize its navy.

Politically, Modi is playing a wider hand and has signaled a willingness to cooperate with the United States on mutually beneficial issues. Prime Minister Modi and President Trump released a joint statement condemning continued North Korean missile tests

during Modi's visit to the White House in July 2017. The joint statement not only condemned North Korean actions, but also demonstrated India's willingness to visibly and directly contest Beijing's regional viewpoint. (India knows that China remains hesitant to engage in harsh action against the North Korean regime, for fear of potential collapse and the reunification of an US-friendly Korean Peninsula. Regardless, Modi chose to align with the United States' stronger position.) Following Pyongyang's July missile tests, India announced further support for UN Security Council sanctions against the North Korean regime.

Opportunities for Cooperation: Indian Receptivity

In 1991, India officially introduced its "Look East" policy, which focused on cultivating extensive economic, strategic, and cultural ties with the ten nations of the

Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Although India had long-standing political, diplomatic, and cultural relations with most Southeast Asian states, the purpose of this policy was to bolster India's regional standing as a counterweight to China's increasingly assertive overtures in Southeast Asia. Since serious geopolitical competition began between the two nations in 1962, following the Sino-Indian War, China and India have been strategic competitors for influence in South and Southeast Asia. The Look East policy has promoted significantly deeper geostrategic, economic, and security relations between India and its Southeast Asian neighbors. Initiated under the purview of Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao, the Look East policy served to enhance India's cooperation in all facets with Southeast Asian states during this period. The bulk of these nations welcomed India's overtures as a potential buffer against the powerful presence of China, which was widely seen as unwelcome in the region.¹⁰

Over time, India's Look East policy grew to develop a focus on the entire Asia-Pacific region as well as on building "economic, institutional and defense links with the region."¹¹ Through engagement with institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia, India has enhanced its defense presence in the broader Asia-Pacific region. Additionally, India has held individual bilateral military engagements with these states and with Japan and South Korea. On the economic side, India has signed Free Trade Agreements with ASEAN nations, which have seen bilateral trade increase significantly within the bloc. India has also participated in negotiations to realize the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership—a major sixteen-nation trade agreement involving ASEAN, China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. The ASEAN-India Free Trade Area (AIFTA) has made ASEAN India's fourth-largest trading partner, with trade surpassing US \$70 billion.

India has not managed to reach parity with China's influence in the ASEAN bloc through its Look East policy. This is due, in part, to China's long-term work building strong, strategic links with Southeast Asian

nations many years before India even introduced the Look East policy. Given China's significantly larger economic, military, and diplomatic clout, India is at a disadvantage. China also has a relatively more affluent, educated, and politically prominent diaspora in Southeast Asia, while Indian migration to Southeast Asia consisted mostly of low-level migrant workers, who were shipped to these lands under the British Raj, which left India with substantial historical baggage.

"India has not managed to reach parity with China's influence in the ASEAN bloc through its Look East policy."

In 2014, India upgraded its Look East policy to an "Act East" policy under the NDA government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Despite the change in nomenclature, this new policy still served to enhance Indian engagement with ASEAN. That said, Prime Minister Modi stated the importance of enhancing relations with Japan, South Korea, and Australia,¹² as well as with the emerging economies of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam.¹³ The Act East policy was initiated in a different geopolitical environment than its predecessor, and it has led to more dynamic ties between India and the ASEAN states. The policy was implemented under the purview of a government with a strong mandate to rule, a stated focus on domestic economic development, and a commitment to boosting India's global role through pragmatic multilateralism.

Currently, India is being regarded as a peripheral player in Southeast Asia relative to powers like the United States, China, and Japan. There is immense room for India to play a significant, permanent role in the economic future of this bloc of nations, especially as the current cumulative investment from India to these four states amounts to only US \$800 million.¹⁴ Given how close the CLMV (Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic

10 Press Trust of India, "India should give bigger priority to ASEAN: Former diplomat," *Economic Times*, March 9, 2017, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-should-give-bigger-priority-to-ASEAN-former-diplomat/articleshow/57553824.cms>.

11 Danielle Rajendram, "From 'Look East' to 'Act East' - India shifts focus," *Deutsche Welle*, December 19, 2014, <http://www.dw.com/en/from-look-east-to-act-east-india-shifts-focus/a-18141462>.

12 Ibid.

13 Chandrajit Banerjee, "From Look East to Act East," *Hindu Business Line*, February 26, 2017, <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/developing-new-global-value-chains-in-partnership/article9560295.ece>.

14 APJ-SLG Law Offices, India's Bilateral Trade with CMLV Countries: Review of India's Agro & Marine exports performance, April 2013, <http://agriexchange.apeda.gov.in/indexp/FTASearchengine/Draft-India-CMLV-Countries-Agri-Marine.pdf>.

Republic, Myanmar, and Vietnam) nations are to major East Asian supply chains, it is very important for India to consolidate its strategic position in the region. Additionally, the Act East policy recognizes the importance of the Indian northeast as a regional gateway to Eastern Asia. Consequently, the Act East policy could enhance the economic and security development of the northeastern states, long heralded as a neglected region of the Indian Union.

The Act East policy has seen India's relationship with major players in the region, such as Japan and Australia, undergo extraordinary growth, which is significant considering the stasis that plagued India's relations with these nations in prior decades. Prime Minister Modi's 2014 visit to Australia was the first of any Indian Prime Minister in twenty-eight years. Additionally, following Prime Minister Modi's election in 2014, India's dealings with Japan included US \$34

billion in public and private investment and deals for the construction of a Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train and dedicated freight corridor projects. This increased pace in engagement between the two nations is largely attributed to the pragmatic governance of Prime Minister Modi, whose policies created a different perception of India's political elite than during the Look East paradigm. India also improved relations with Mongolia and Fiji through the Act East policy, demonstrating the new scope of its approach to the Asia-Pacific.

While China's geostrategic presence still looms over India across the Asia-Pacific, it is possible that greater constructive individual and collective engagement with the nations in the broader Asia-Pacific could allow for India to emerge as China's chief regional competitor in grand geopolitics.

CONNECTIVITY

In the last two decades, bilateral trade between India and China has increased to US \$71.5 billion, with China overtaking the United States as India's largest trade partner. Still, this change has not produced a resolution to the 3,500-km border dispute that has existed since 1962 between the two nations, nor has there been a resolution to the more contentious set of misperceptions and hostilities that exist between the populations of both nations. While the number of tourists traveling between India and China has increased in recent years, these flows remain heavily skewed in China's favor. While there are infrastructural and logistical reasons for this disparity, India also suffers from a major public relations problem inside China. The dominant Chinese perceptions of India are more negative than vice versa, and the Chinese widely "look down on India."¹⁵ One example that this superiority complex toward India seems to be widely prevalent throughout China is evident in a recent video of state-sponsored Chinese propaganda, released shortly after the military standoff in Doklam. The video portrayed a Chinese man representing a racist caricature of India speaking in a faux Indian accent and wearing a fake beard and turban. This man is characterized in the video as lazy, timid, and childish.¹⁶ Beyond the anecdotal evidence of state propaganda, there is research that despite the long history of civilizational and interpersonal connectivity between China and India over two millennia, "surveys done in China by PEW and other organizations indicate a lack of awareness and low favorable ratings regarding India and Indians among Chinese people."¹⁷

On May 13, 2017, China announced its One Belt—One Road (also known as the Belt and Road Initiative or BRI) strategy over a two-day summit in Beijing. Through a network of infrastructural hardware, the BRI project currently has at least US \$1 trillion in

investments committed. It must be noted that the BRI is still an aspiration of Xi Jinping's, meant to provide public goods aimed at enhancing China's status and influence as well as exporting Chinese industrial overcapacity to other nations.¹⁸

Through the BRI, China seeks to invest heavily in South Asia—primarily through the CPEC—which is a large-scale economic collaboration program with Pakistan. Through CPEC, China is investing US \$60 billion on a network of roads, railways, fiber optic cables, and other hard infrastructural projects in Pakistan. This corridor will stretch from Xinjiang to Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea, creating a short trade route to global markets for the Chinese. In Gwadar, China is developing a Free Zone and a new international airport in addition to new highways and roads. China is also investing heavily in Sri Lanka, where it has funded the construction of a new port in Hambantota and a deepwater container terminal in Colombo. The Chinese-sponsored turnaround of these projects is much needed by Sri Lanka, a country with a US \$58.3 billion debt. Currently over 95 percent of Sri Lankan government revenue is being used for debt service. Additionally, given that Mattala International Airport is quite significantly underused and Hambantota port is running under capacity,¹⁹ significant Chinese investments in these projects will give it much greater leverage in Sri Lanka. A third South Asian country, Bangladesh, signed on to the BRI initiative under terms that China will invest in Bangladeshi power grids, coal mines, and other industries. The two deals that Bangladesh signed under the BRI were signed with the Export-Import Bank of China.

Despite President Xi Jinping's suggestion that the motivations behind the BRI project were to "create a big family of harmonious co-existence,"²⁰ India has

15 Martin Jacques, "'The Chinese look down on India and that bugs me,'" *Telegraph* (India), July 29, 2012, via Martin Jacques.com, <http://www.martinjacques.com/when-china-rules-the-world/the-chinese-look-down-on-india-and-that-bugs-me/>.

16 Javier C. Hernandez, "Chinese Video on Border Standoff with India Provokes Accusations of Racism," *New York Times*, August 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/17/world/asia/china-india-racist-video-border-standoff.html?mcubz=3>.

17 "India-China Connectivity: Past and Present," Event Report, Observer Research Foundation, August 2, 2014, <http://www.orfonline.org/research/india-china-connectivity-past-and-present/>.

18 Shivshankar Menon, "The unprecedented Promises- and Threats- of the Belt and Road Initiative," Brookings Institute, April 28, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-unprecedented-promises-and-threats-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative/>.

19 Wade Shepard, "China Tells Sri Lanka: We Want Our Money, Not Your Empty Airport," *Forbes*, July 31, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2016/07/31/china-to-sri-lanka-we-want-our-money-not-your-empty-airport/#6f11ad2b1beb>.

20 "Xi Jinping is enjoying a 'belt and road' glow," *Economist*, Banyan, May 18, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/china/21722179-it-will-do-little-strengthen-his-hand-home-xi-jinping-enjoying-belt-and-road-glow>.



Photo credit: Moign Khawaja/Flickr.

not acceded to the initiative. This hesitancy reflects the worries that plague the Indian strategic elite about possible hegemonic incentives behind the façade of greater connectivity in the BRI. India is the only South Asian nation that has not signed on to the initiative, maintaining opposition to China's involvement in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that passes through Pakistani-occupied Kashmir. Prime Minister Modi personally acknowledged India's sovereign sensitivities saying that "connectivity in itself cannot override or undermine the sovereignty of other nations."²¹ Specifically, China's claims over a large part of Arunachal Pradesh (called South Tibet in China) are a key fixture of the Sino-Indian border dispute that forms part of India's apprehension over the BRI. The Chinese government is particularly concerned about the district of Tawang, which is a site of religious significance to the Tibetan population and the Central Tibetan administration led by the Dalai Lama. It was at a monastery in Tawang where the Dalai

Lama stopped just before being exiled to India in 1959. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has openly stated that "Under India's illegal rule, the residents of Southern Tibet live difficult lives, face various kinds of discrimination, and look forward to returning to China."²² Additionally, the Chinese foreign ministry stated that it is their "lawful right" to name new cities in Arunachal Pradesh. The perception that India's sovereignty is threatened by Chinese encroachments in Arunachal Pradesh is another element of India's reluctance to sign on to the BRI.

In the words of the analyst Parag Khanna, "While the two Asian giants have far more to gain from friendly ties than from fighting over literally 0.1 percent of their combined territory, it would still be entirely unsurprising if Chinese infiltration of a narrow protrusion of northern Sikkim near a strategic Tibetan highway (known as the Finger) . . . created a fait accompli for China to occupy India's Tibetan populated Arunachal Pradesh

21 Harsh Pant, "India Challenges China's Intentions on One Belt, One Road Initiative," Yale Global Online, June 22, 2017, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/india-challenges-chinas-intentions-one-belt-one-road-initiative>.

22 Centre for China Analysis & Strategy, *Tibet Insight News*, last accessed October 12, 2017, <https://ccasindia.org/tibat-insight-2.php>.

The Sino-Indian Clash and the New Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific

(which China claims as ‘South Tibet’) on the other side of Bhutan. But after the dust has settled, the ice has melted, the wreckage has been cleared, the bodies have been counted, the treaties have been signed, and the borders have shifted, the “Southern Silk Road” from India to China would thrive again.”²³

A resolution to the crisis seems unlikely in the short and medium term; efforts to ameliorate this crisis have remained in stasis since 1988, when former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi set up the first Joint Working Group to address the issue. That said, the border dispute is but one element of broader Sino-Indian relations. Enhanced connectivity fundamentally must deal with flows of capital, people, and technology between the two nations.

Greater cultural understanding between the populations of the two countries would improve the contours of overall bilateral relations. Currently, there are limited opportunities for travel between China and India, as there is only one almost daily direct flight between Delhi and Beijing and no direct flights connecting Shanghai and Mumbai. A broader range of air routes would undoubtedly lead to more travel between the hubs of both states and help to foster enhanced cultural understanding in addition to greater economic linkages. India can also work to deepen its connectivity with China through multilateral approaches. China has been enhancing

its trade and strategic cooperation with India’s South Asian neighbors through a marshaling of its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank resources as well as through individual bilateral cooperation.

India can emulate this approach through different multilateral forums. South Asian nations remain extremely poorly connected and integrated. Given how the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has not managed to encourage greater integration, “most SAARC countries rely heavily on developed nations as export destinations, and increasingly [on] import from China.”²⁴ Indeed, following the announcement of the BRI, India began to accelerate progress on the South Asian Sub-Regional Economic Cooperation (SASEC) road connectivity project. In July, the Indian government approved an INR 1,630 crore (US \$254,397,330) project to widen a road stretch between Imphal, in the northeastern state of Manipur, and More, which is on the Indo-Myanmar border. Enhanced connectivity between the Indian northeast, Myanmar, and Bangladesh would help to foster significant economic activity in the region. This initiative is a counter to the BRI project and would reaffirm India’s commitments to its regional neighbors to enhance grander frameworks for regional connectivity in South Asia.

²³ Parag Khanna, “Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization,” (New York: Random House, 2016).

²⁴ Ashlyn Anderson and Alyssa Ayres, “Economics of Influence: China and India in South Asia,” Council of Foreign Relations, August 3, 2015, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/economics-influence-china-and-india-south-asia>.

MARITIME

Over the last decade, the transatlantic liberal international economic order has increasingly been challenged by economically ascendant non-western powers. This reality is especially clear in the Asian maritime sphere, where the Chinese presence in the East and South China Seas has become more bellicose. Asian defense spending surpassed that of Europe in 2014 and continues to rise.²⁵ An Asian arms race, particularly in the maritime realm and notable in the acquisition of submarines, is unfolding.²⁶ Additionally, China has challenged UNCLOS with its own unique interpretation of the law in order to demand greater power over foreign military activity in its Exclusive Economic Zone. This stance has been mirrored by India, which has also been accused of aggression in its maritime dealings by smaller neighbors. India has engaged with these countries on a bilateral basis rather than through international courts, which has allowed it to exert undue influence.

In the words of one legal scholar, “It is a paradox of the current international order that Asia—the most populous and economically dynamic region on the planet—arguably benefits most from the security and economic dividends provided by international law and institutions and, yet, is the warriest about embracing those rules and structures.”²⁷ This wariness is heightened for the Indian establishment when the Chinese leadership refers to the South China Sea as its “own sea”—it leads them to wonder about the inroads that China might make in the Indian Ocean following its trajectory in the South China Sea.

The Indian Ocean, traditionally one of the world’s most militarized spaces, has seen volatility increase with Chinese activity in the basin. Long a key fixture of India’s sphere of influence, the Indian Ocean has geopolitical significance in many sectors, including energy, as two-thirds of global petroleum traffic traverses it. Additionally, the Indian Ocean is a strategic water way to Africa and the Middle East as well as South and Southeast Asia. Since India’s economic

neo-liberalization in 1991, which fueled its defense budget, it has further expanded its influence in the Indian Ocean. In fact, in 2014, India became the first Asian nation, after Japan, to have two operational aircraft carriers. India has also consolidated its preeminence in the Indian Ocean through its cooperation with neighbors in forums such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and through bilateral naval exercises; this cooperation is likely to increase as India has embarked on the development of a blue water navy.

Following the initiation of economic reforms in China in 1978, it has become more assertive in the Indian Ocean as well as in the South China Sea. This is principally a consequence of China’s status as a trade rival to Japan, but also because it would not be possible to establish its preeminence in the South China Sea without asserting clout in the Indian Ocean. The Straits of Malacca are central to Chinese oil supplies in the Middle East and to its access to Africa, which is a major investment destination and recipient for Chinese private sector investment and state developmental finance.

This broader strategic narrative explains the enhanced Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean, notably its joint venture with Pakistan to build the CPEC. These flows of developmental finance have been referred to as a facet of China’s unofficial “String of Pearls” strategy to develop “commercial and military outposts along their main maritime trading route”²⁸ and to isolate India in the process.

On July 13, 2017, China dispatched troops to Djibouti prior to the establishment of its first overseas naval base there—strategically located on the Horn of Africa. In so doing, China joined the ranks of the United States, Japan, and France in having permanent bases in Djibouti. According to an editorial in the Chinese state-run *Global Times*, “Certainly this is the People’s Liberation Army’s first overseas base and we will base

25 Myra MacDonald, “Asia’s defense spending overtakes Europe’s: IISS,” Reuters, March 14, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-security-military-iiss/asia-defense-spending-overtakes-europes-iiss-idUSBRE92D0EL20130314>.

26 Elias Groll and Dan De Luce, “China is fueling a submarine arms race in the Asia-Pacific,” *Foreign Policy*, August 26, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/26/china-is-fueling-a-submarine-arms-race-in-the-asia-pacific/>.

27 Iskander Rehman, “India, China, and differing conceptions of the maritime order,” Brookings Institute, June 20, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/india-china-and-differing-conceptions-of-the-maritime-order/>.

28 Panos Mourdoukoutas, “Indian Ocean: India is playing catch up with Pakistan and China,” *Forbes*, July 24, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/panosmourdoukoutas/2017/07/24/indian-ocean-india-is-playing-catch-up-with-pakistan-and-china/#5663a0b598f2>.

troops there. It's not a commercial resupply point. . . . This base can support [the] Chinese Navy to go farther, so it means a lot."²⁹ A Chinese foreign ministry spokesman went further to say that "the completion and operation of the base will help China better fulfill its international obligations in conducting escorting missions and humanitarian assistance . . . It will also help promote economic and social development in Djibouti."³⁰ External analysts disagree with the stated claims of Chinese officials. According to observers, the base in Djibouti is about "naval power expansion for protecting commerce and China's regional interests in the Horn of Africa."³¹ In addition to China's activities in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, the naval base demonstrates the far-reaching vision of the global maritime strategy of the People's Republic.

India, too, has been attempting to deepen its intra-Asian security cooperation by playing a significant role in multilateral coalition efforts. The most notable effort thus far was the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD)—an informal strategic dialogue between India, the United States, Japan, and Australia. Initiated in 2007, by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the dialogue was an effort to forge consensus among the four actors to enhance their security presence in the Asia-Pacific and to preserve a rule-based global order. Widely seen as a collective countermeasure to the assertive overtures made by China in the East and South China Seas, the Chinese government responded strongly to the first QSD by sending out official protests to all four participants. As a result, Australia, which is economically dependent on China, withdrew from the alliance in 2007.

Despite the ill-fated initial QSD in 2007, the maritime interests of the three states converged following greater economic interdependence and a collective threat posed by the economic ascent of China. India, Japan, and the United States are collectively focused on China's increasing assertiveness in the region, but also on the consequences of enhanced regional integration. In 2016, Admiral Harris of the US Pacific Command said at the Raisina Dialogues in New

Delhi: "Together (the United States, India, Japan, and Australia) can develop a roadmap that leverages our respective efforts to improve the security architecture and strengthen regional dialogues. Together, we can ensure free and open sea lanes of communication. . . ."³² There was an immediate response to this overture from the Chinese foreign ministry, which stated, "We urge the US government to put some restraint on them (US Commanders) and stop them from irresponsible sensationalism and hyping up to avoid undermining regional peace and stability."³³ This security buildup is a collective hedging strategy against a greater potential Chinese expansion in the region, but there is cautiousness on all sides against overtly offending Chinese sensitivities.

Another significant set of joint military exercises between the United States, Japan, and India called the Malabar exercises, began in 1992 with just India and the United States participating. In 2017, the third attempted revival of the wider quadrilateral grouping was held in Sydney. Inferences from its location withstanding, it was widely reported that India blocked Australia from observing the 2017 Malabar exercises. Just as in 2007, Australia under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd had backtracked from the Malabar exercises despite initially participating in joint exercises. Again, speculation centered on how economically dependent Australia is on China—a reality that would need to be taken into consideration in the conduct of Australia's foreign policy. In planning to construct joint military infrastructure, India likewise must be wary of Chinese sensitivities, as it seeks to balance economic relations with regional security.

India has been expanding bilateral security ties in the region as well, most importantly with Japan and Vietnam. Since 2000, India and Japan have continued to expand their security partnership, particularly in the maritime realm. This includes joint coast guard training exercises and an expanding range of defense dialogues on strategy in the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific.³⁴ India-Japan ties build on the US-Japan alliance and are increasingly complementary to that framework.

29 Reuters Staff, "China formally opens first overseas military base in Djibouti," *Reuters*, August 1, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/12/asia/china-djibouti-military-base/>.

30 Brad Lendon and Steve George "China sends troops to Djibouti, establishes first overseas military base," CNN, July 13, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/12/asia/china-djibouti-military-base/index.html>.

31 Andrew Jacobs and Jane Perlez, "U.S. Wary of Its New Neighbor in Djibouti: A Chinese Naval Base," *New York Times*, February 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/25/world/africa/us-djibouti-chinese-naval-base.html>.

32 Gurmeet Kanwal, "India must join US Japan and Australia to contain China's Adventurism," *Hindustan Times*, March 31, 2016.

33 Ibid.

34 For a detailed discussion on the history and evolution of India-Japan defense cooperation see: Thomas F. Lynch III and James J. Przystup, *India-Japan Strategic Cooperation and Implications for U.S. Strategy in the Indo-Asia-Pacific Region*, Strategic Perspective, National Defense University Press, March 14, 2017, <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/1112276/india-japan-strategic-cooperation-and-implications-for-us-strategy-in-the-indo/>.

Japanese Prime Minister Abe's September 2017 visit to New Delhi marked a substantial deepening and widening of the Japan-India economic and strategic partnership. Abe laid the foundations for a \$17 billion rail project as a showcase for a broad range of investments in infrastructure and other economic cooperation, outlined in a lengthy joint statement that outlined deepening defense collaboration in the form of expanded exercises, maritime cooperation, joint research into defense technology, and cooperation in areas such as anti-submarine warfare, surveillance, robotics, and unmanned systems.

In August of 2017, the Vietnamese government indicated that it had purchased BrahMos anti-ship cruise missiles from India, in a manner that was "consistent with the policy of peace and self-defense and is the normal practice in national defense."³⁵ Although the Indian Ministry of External Affairs promptly termed

the statement as "incorrect,"³⁶ India's diplomatic ties to Vietnam, which reach back into the Cold War and the nonaligned movement, are nonetheless on the rise. In 2000, India's then Defense Minister George Fernandes reached an accord formalizing defense cooperation. This included training of air force pilots and joint coast guard and naval exercises.³⁷

As China's maritime assertiveness began to grow in 2010, India and Vietnam upgraded their defense ties. Delhi has become more vocal on South China Sea issues, as well as deepening its defense ties to Hanoi. In 2014, when Hanoi's Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung visited Delhi, Prime Minister Modi declared that "Our defense cooperation (partnership) with Vietnam is among our most important ones."³⁸ On a return visit to Hanoi, Modi issued a Joint Vision Statement and Delhi has offered a \$500 million defense credit and has been negotiating a range of weapons exports.³⁹

35 Khanh Linh, "Vietnam hails burgeoning defense ties with India," *VN Express*, August 18, 2017, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-hails-burgeoning-defense-ties-with-india-3629191.html>.

36 Press Trust of India, "Govt says report of BrahMos sale to Vietnam incorrect," *LiveMint*, August 19, 2017, www.livemint.com/Politics/RhxnFOPECLcLgDAS4RFBel/Govt-says-report-of-BrahMos-sale-to-Vietnam-incorrect.html.

37 Vu Trong Khanh, "India and Vietnam Boost Military, Commercial Ties," *Wall Street Journal*, September 3, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/india-and-vietnam-boost-military-commercial-ties-1472887239>.

38 Brig. Vinod Anand, "Achievements: India- Vietnam Defence and Security Cooperation", Vivekananda International Foundation, May 12, 2017, www.vifindia.org/article/2017/may/12/achievements-india-vietnam-defence-and-security-cooperation.

39 P.K Gosh, "Enhancing Interoperability and capacity building: cooperative approach of the Indian Navy," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, October 20, 2016, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19480881.2016.1226754?journalCode=rrior20>.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Clearly, in a dynamic Indo-Pacific security environment, Sino-Indian ties have grown more problematic. While China and India have substantial economic ties and common interests, particularly as both are members of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) organizations and Group of Twenty (G20) nations, nonetheless, legal territorial issues will continue to spur Indian skepticism about Chinese intentions.

In an era where geopolitics has returned as a driver of security relationships, a re-merging India and a re-emerging China are in some sense strategic competitors. As a democracy and a committed market-oriented economy, India appears more focused than China on the rules-based global order, while trying to build a larger role and expand its voice and influence within it. China's assertive maritime policies, layered on existing border disputes and its response to international arbitration, have also managed to highlight India's commitment to international law as a guide to foreign policy. Counterbalancing China's strategic and economic weight is a growing trend in India's foreign policy. Taken together, these trends indicate new opportunities for the US-India strategic partnership as well as for a loose coalition of Indo-Pacific nations with overlapping strategic interests.

There are several initiatives that India should approach on two tracks— independently and in concert with the United States and other nations—to affirm its role in the emerging Indo-Pacific region.

1. India and the United States should enhance joint maritime patrols in the Indian Ocean. Both nations should seek to assert their presence in the international sea lanes where China is expanding its reach. This would help the United States and India collectively balance the Chinese military ascent in the Indian Ocean. Additionally, the United States and India must boost bilateral security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific. India should also seek assistance from Japan and the United States in developing its indigenous shipbuilding capabilities and should consider permitting Australia to join the Malabar exercises to resurrect the initial Quadrilateral grouping. In this event, the existing Malabar naval exercises should be sustained to increase the ability of the Quadrilateral forces to work together cohesively.
2. India should improve its carrier aviation capacity, which will help maintain sea control in the Indian Ocean. India's military structure is based on carrier battle groups, which gives it an advantage over the Chinese Navy. However, China's push for naval modernization over the last decade has widened the gap in the capability of both militaries, and India needs to overcome its deficits by developing a long-term plan to enhance its naval capacity. Specifically, the United States can play a major role in helping India modernize its unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) fleet. Currently, American UAV drones manufactured for India operate at a greater altitude and have further range than India's UAVs,⁴⁰ which are mostly indigenously manufactured or imported from Israel. These drones could monitor India's volatile border situation in an economically efficient manner, given how difficult the terrain is for ordinary soldiers to surmount.
3. India must seek to improve its space surveillance capacities. India already possesses a developed space program (ISRO) which it must utilize to serve practical military needs. India has successfully launched an indigenous surveillance satellite based on radar technology—the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) RISAT 1—in 2012. The RISAT 1 was developed to help Indian (and South Asian) emergency officials respond to natural disasters. However, the Indian military could use this technology to survey volatile border regions and other militaries. The United States has an opportunity to partner with India to help develop space surveillance capacity. Cooperation between the two nations in this regard would increase “Maritime Domain Awareness in the Indian Ocean region while simultaneously countering asymmetric Chinese space surveillance capabilities.”⁴¹
4. Primarily, India should focus on replicating a national security architecture similar to that

40 Jon M. Huntsman, Jr. and Bharath Gopalaswamy, “Transforming India from a Balancing to a Leading Power,” *National Interest*, April 14, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/transforming-india-balancing-leading-power-12624>.

41 Ibid.

found in countries like the United States, Israel, and China. India should seek to establish a body like the United States' Office of the Federal Chief Information Security Officer. This body should attempt to streamline, or incorporate, the analyses of the country's decentralized cyber operations and surveillance polities. In attempting to bolster this body, India should seek to strengthen the "National Cyber Security Policy 2013," by improving its contents and facilitating its implementation. The Indian government should seek to onboard capable private sector firms that can assist in the development of India's indigenous capacities in digital forensics and information security. Additionally, the government should seek to connect top Indian institutes of technology with the appropriate government departments. This would allow for a greater focus on ingenuity because it would lead to the possibility of government employment. India should seek greater bilateral engagement with the United States and Israel to improve its cyber offensive tactics.

5. India should establish forward bases to "advise" the militaries of neighboring countries. India could set up a brigade for each South Asian nation

(other than Pakistan), which would take on the responsibility of training and advising the militaries of those countries. India could also create a satellite campus of the National Defense Academy, or an entirely new academy, to train greater numbers of Bhutanese/ Nepali/ Bangladeshi/ Sri Lankan troops in India.

6. Build Special Operations Forces—Recent use of its special forces on Pakistani territory demonstrates India's willingness to conduct asymmetrical warfare. Despite India's formidable military prowess on the world stage, the Indian Army Special Forces do not match their US counterparts. India should seek to centralize the command of all its special forces units, which are currently under the purview of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Ministry of Home Affairs, and the Research and Analysis Wing.
7. India should propose regular India-US-China talks at least on an annual basis, perhaps on the margins of the G20 or East Asian Summit meetings aimed at minimizing the risk of misperception or miscalculation. There is a distinction between counterbalancing and containment.

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