

ARE INDIA AND CHINA DESTINED FOR WAR? THREE FUTURE SCENARIOS

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“Frontiers are indeed the razor’s edge on which hang suspended the modern issues of war or peace, of life or death to nations.”

Lord Curzon

INTRODUCTION

The Greek historian Thucydides writing on the Peloponnesian War argued that when an established power encounters a rising power, the possibility of conflict between the established and rising power would become inevitable.¹ Graham T. Allison in his book, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?*, extended Thucydides’ primary argument by suggesting that the power dynamics between China and the United States is similarly poised, an established power—the United States—confronting an aggressive power in China may produce a military conflict between them.² The Thucydides Trap argument has also been applied to the India-China conflict, in which India, a rising power, is confronted by China, the established power.³ But such comparisons are unsatisfactory because of the power asymmetry is against India. The overall military, economic, and political balance of power tilts towards China. Chinese strategists discount India as a serious security or economic threat. For China, India assumes substantial low priority military threat compared to the United States.⁴ More often India is described as a “barking dog” that must be ignored and its policy actions are described as having little political impact.⁵ India has resisted the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), refused to join the Beijing-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and cancelled many of the Chinese infrastructure projects in India after the fighting along the border.⁶

Strategic assessments suggests that military balance—conventional and nuclear—overwhelmingly leans towards China.⁷ Indian military leaders have publicly acknowledged that India does not have “the capability nor the intention to match China, force for force.”⁸ However, others have cautioned that India will not reflexively acquiesce when faced with a military threat from China.⁹ India has not relented against aggressive Chinese posture along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in 2013, 2017, and more recently in the bloody hand-to-hand combat both India and China suffered casualties in June 2020 (see Table 19.1). But India has resisted Chinese aggressiveness, albeit with the mixed success, along the border since the occupation of Tibet in 1959 and the first Sino-Indian war in 1962. The Indian armed forces have repelled Chinese incursions across the border and managed to stave off the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) drives periodically.¹⁰ But for how long can India parry the repeated incursions by the PLA along the LAC and does India have the wherewithal to sustain a long military campaign against China?¹¹ In the most recent (June 15, 2020) military clashes in the Galwan Valley in the Ladakh region along the LAC, 20 Indian soldiers and 43 Chinese PLA were presumed killed in action.^{12,13}

Table 19. 1: Major Military Clashes between India and China

Year	Location	Outcome
1962 (20 Oct-21 Nov)	Aksai Chin and Northeast India	Chinese Victory
1967 (1 Oct 2 Oct 2)	Nathu La & Cho Law (Sikkim)	Indian Victory
1975 (20 Oct)	Tulung La, Arunachal Pradesh	Indian Casualties
1987 (Spring-Summer)	Sumdorong Chu, Arunachal Pradesh	Stand-Off
2013 (15 April – 5 May)	Daulat Beg Oldi, Ladakh	Stand-Off (hand-to-hand combat)
2017 (16 June – 28 Aug)	Doklam, (Tibet, India, Bhutan)	Stand-Off (hand-to-hand combat)
2020 (May 2020-...)	Pangong Tso, Galwan Valley, and Hot Springs	Hand-to-Hand Combat: Indian & Chinese Casualties

*No official confirmation of casualties by the Chinese government.

Tensions between both countries have repeatedly flared since the creation of India on August 15, 1947 and the People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1, 1949, when the British colonial government hastily exited India leaving behind a legacy of unresolved boundary disputes from Burma in the east to Pakistan in the west, and Tibet and Kashmir in the north. The India-China border conflict has evolved not just into a geostrategic competition that has outlasted the Cold War because at the center of it, the conflict is about the unresolved territorial claims. States are fundamentally territorial constructs that engage in vigorous competition for control of such territory and territory with particular salience is more susceptible to militarization.¹⁴ India and China are no different; both countries have engaged in frequent military standoffs to define the border and stake claim to contested territory.¹⁵ The India-China border dispute became particularly contentious after the PRC's invasion and occupation of Tibet and after the 14th Dalai Lama fled to India in March 1959.¹⁶ Subsequently, China attacked India on October 20, 1962; Mao wanted to "teach India a lesson" and in the process India permanently lost territory (estimated to be around 43,000 sq. km) and more than 3,000 soldiers.¹⁷ Regular borders disputes are an outcome of India's inability to resist continuous expansion along the expansive border—4,057 km—and because China refuses to accept India's conception of the LAC as the border that separates the Indo-Tibetan frontier. Beijing has engaged in gray-zone tactics—just below the threshold of a major war—to continuously challenge India in multiple arenas.¹⁸

Looking ahead another quarter century, this chapter seeks to draw insights from foresight analysis to identify some of the possible scenarios of the future of India-China conflict. Assuming *ceteris paribus*, if the last 25 years or the last 70 years is any indication, one could predict that the *status quo will probably* prevail, but it will be accompanied by continued military build-up across the Line of Actual Control both by India and China, with increased strategic competition and frequent military confrontations. The *status quo* refers to a situation in which the present territorial conflict continues without any major alterations to the understanding of the LAC through the application of military force by China or India. The *status quo*, however, is not a stable equilibrium; it is an extraordinarily fragile arrangement, and it would require sustained efforts by both parties to maintain it. More importantly, the *status quo* is *not* the preferred outcome of China, but only India's. The PRC would prefer to have a territorial arrangement that is diametrically opposed to India's understanding. Beijing is unceasingly searching to alter the prevailing territorial arrangement. It is a revisionist

power that is seeking to revise and expand its territorial boundaries not just the land borders with India and Bhutan, but also its maritime borders with several littoral states in the Indo-Pacific. China wants to expand its territorial possessions and control land and sea through the One-Belt-One-Road initiative (OBOR).

In this chapter, I outline and discuss three future scenarios (see Table 19.2) as to how this conflict is likely to progress over the next quarter century. Scenario 1: *status quo* will persist, albeit highly unstable, in which at least one party will seek to avoid a military confrontation (hot war) through active negotiations, crisis management, and high-level diplomacy. Scenario 2: an end to the conflict cycle could only be achieved through a *grand territorial bargain* at the highest level and it will result in a peaceful settlement of the border dispute that is mutually agreeable to both parties. Scenario 3: a small border conflagration escalates into a wider *military conflict (a hot war)* between India and China.

THE FUTURE SCENARIOS IN BRIEF

Drawing from foresight analysis,¹⁹ it is possible to imagine all three scenarios as being equally likely in the next 15 or the next 30 years and it could produce a combination of the three outcomes, such as return to the *status quo-ante* or the creation of a new *status quo* after a nasty, brutish, and/or several clashes over period of years in which China is able to secure additional territory. History of India-China conflict (see Tables 19.2 and 19.3) has shown that border clashes and the attempt to revert back to the *status quo* are regular occurrences and they are unlikely to resolve unless one party defeats another decisively or if there is a *grand bargain*. The frequency of such clashes may decline or increase, but until the fundamental basis—the differing conceptions of border claims—of the conflict is addressed there will be no permanent peace. The India-China conflict is locked into a peak rivalry mode in which the equilibrium is *status quo* from the Indian perspective (which is a temporal arrangement) and an ever expanding territorial claim, which is a more permanent vision for China. Over the decades India has presented several versions of detailed maps and other historical claims, which have all been ignored or rejected by the Chinese side. Beijing has not presented any understanding of the border areas—maps or claim documents—instead it has parlayed New Delhi's intentions and it has not revealed its understanding of the border area.²⁰ This has allowed China to perpetually revise its position and challenge India's conceptions of the border.

Table 19. 2: Possible Scenarios of Predicted Course of India-China Conflict Pathways

Future Scenarios	Fragile Status quo	Grand Bargain	Hot War
0-15 Years	Will Continue	Unlikely	Likely
15-30 Years	Uncertain	Likely	Likely

**Assessed in Years, Holding Other Factors Constant*

Scenario 1: 0-15 Years

The baseline assumption is that the fragile *status quo* is likely to persist, though highly tenuous, in which India will fight hard to maintain the current shape of the LAC while attempting not to escalate into a large-scale military conflict (or hot war). The aim for India is to continue with the current understanding of the LAC in which it seeks to manage aggressive Chinese tactics such as salami-slicing—a practice in which China incrementally slices off territory—and changing the facts on the ground, a ploy that will cumulatively alter the balance of territorial arrangements in its favor; a tactic that Beijing has effectively employed in the South China Sea maritime conflict.²¹

The *status quo* is not a situation of peace, but a situation of tense military balance in which one party seeks not to be pushed back or out of the ring as in a Japanese *sumo* wrestling competition. Nevertheless, the prediction here is that this fragile *status quo* that is frequently tested by the recurrent clashes (see Table 19.1) between the PLA and the Indian Army is unlikely to prevail in the long run (15-30 years out). Changing geopolitical or military balance and shifts in the global alliance arrangements could change this delicate balance.

A grand bargain is unlikely unless both parties are willing to make territorial concessions. The prevailing position within the Politburo of the ruling Chinese Communist Party of China is that such compromises are not required because it believes that it can secure its territorial claims without making any concessions.²² The Indian government is more likely to pursue a high-stakes diplomatic approach towards a territorial swap to settle the border issue, but India very well might be forced into a position in which any territorial concessions to China would have enormous domestic political consequences making the possibility of a grand bargain complicated. As this unresolved territorial conflict periodically flares up

into military stand-offs and the PLA continues to make incisive forays into Indian controlled territory, the possibility of an escalating military conflict becomes more likely.

Scenario 2: 15-30 Years

The fragile *status quo* is unlikely to persist in the long-run precisely because it is tenuous and not a permanent solution to the India-China border dispute. Given the brittleness of the *status quo*, it is unlikely to persist in the long run as the PLA continually seeks to alter the *status quo* either through use of force and political coercion. Parallely, the possibility of a hot war or a full-scale military engagement also grows. Change in domestic political conditions and external geopolitical factors could force both countries to accept a negotiated settlement that is mutually acceptable to both. Beijing has signed territorial agreements with some of its neighbors and India has settled its borders with Bangladesh and its maritime boundaries with Sri Lanka.²³ But a grand bargain is only possible when changes to the regional and extra-regional security environment also occur, or if and when domestic political changes materialize in China. The current Xi Jinping government is not in a concessionary mood and it believes that exercise of *machtpolitik* is necessary to realize the “China Dream”—the dream of making China a great power as it once was—and erase from the memory the century of humiliation.²⁴ If the current trajectory of Chinese wolf-warrior policy persists, the possibility of a grand bargain is rather dim, and the probability of a hot war increases. Hence, the *status quo* along the border is an impermanent arrangement.

TIBET’S CENTRALITY IN THE INDIA-CHINA CONFLICT

China’s territorial conflict with India is fundamentally about the territorial and cultural incorporation of Tibet into the modern Chinese empire. In China’s interpretation, as expressed by Lian Xiangmin, Director of Contemporary Research at the China Tibetology Research Centre, Tawang “is a part of Tibet and Tibet is a part of China” so by extension “Tawang is a part of China.”²⁵ From a military perspective, India anticipates a high-altitude attack from the Tibet side of China to reshape the Himalayan boundary and capture the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, particularly the town of Tawang, which is central to Tibetan Buddhism.²⁶ China has protested the visits of high-level officials to Tawang to assert its claim over that area. It vociferously protested the visit by the exiled Dalai

Lama to Tawang, the visits by the American ambassador to India, and the tour of the border areas by the Indian defense minister.²⁷ There has been a sustained effort to delegitimize India's control of Tawang because China believes controlling Tawang is critical to China's efforts at absorbing Tibet. Tawang's centrality also lies in China's eagerness to manage the succession of the next Dalai Lama.²⁸

Beijing wants to ensure that the installation of the next Dalai Lama would allow it to control and manipulate the Dalai Lama, something it has not been able to do because the 14th Dalai Lama fled Tibet during China's war on Tibet in March 1959.²⁹ The Indian government has not issued any official statement on Chinese policies towards its own citizens or with regards to Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan with the intention of not provoking and hoping to keep things amicable along the border. India has not commented on most aspects of Chinese foreign or domestic policy. However, India hosts the 14th Dalai Lama and allows the exiled Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) to function from Dharamshala and this has caused much consternation to Beijing.³⁰ In turn, Beijing has launched relentless attacks on the Dalai Lama referring to him as a "wolf in monk's robes" and a "splittist" engaging in "anti-China activities overseas under the pretext of religion."³¹

CHINA-PAKISTAN ALLIANCE AND THE INDIA-CHINA CONFLICT

India's focus exclusively remains on the border dispute, Pakistan, Indian Ocean Region, and to some extent on the South China Sea, but only with regard to its own intent to pursue freedom of the seas operations and India has not directly commented on China's South China Sea disputes. Similarly, China has been very circumspect in the overt demonstration of its nuclear power or issuing direct nuclear threats. In this triangular territorial and regional security competition, Pakistan is the only actor that has directly threatened India with a first strike tactical nuclear attack in the event of ground or air attacks by India.³²

A worrisome factor for India is the China-Pakistan nuclear alliance in which China is not only sharing its nuclear know-how with Pakistan, but it is also assisting Pakistan's missile development program and selling Pakistan strategic weapons such as fighter jets and submarines.³³ The overall probability of a nuclear war between India and China remains relatively low to nonexistent, but such a probability is exceptionally high between India and Pakistan.³⁴ A South Asian nuclear conflagration could occur

because India and Pakistan also have unresolved territorial issues that is equally vexing. A Pakistan emboldened by Chinese support may actually utilize battlefield nuclear weapons against Indian troops seeking to cross into Pakistani territory in response to a large-scale terror attack, which India believes originated from Pakistan.³⁵

Pakistan wants to prevent such Indian plans by suggesting that it will respond with nuclear weapons even in response to limited-distance thrusts as envisaged under Cold Start doctrine.³⁶ Pakistan's battlefield deployable missile, the *Nasr* is designed to counter India's Cold Start doctrine, which is an Indian battle plan to punish Pakistan by conducting shallow incursions into its territory. The primary objective of this Cold Start doctrine is to not provide Pakistan with a justifiable cause for retaliating with a large-scale nuclear attack on India. Pakistan's answer is the *Nasr*—Theater Nuclear Weapon (TNW)—a missile that could carry a small tactical nuclear warhead, which could balance against India's conventional superiority.³⁷ Pakistan only intends to use this weapon when Indian troops are already in its territory, which it believes is justified and less provocative than launching a nuclear counterforce attack on India. However, analysts have warned that once the first nuclear weapon is used against an enemy force the dynamics of uncontrolled escalation come into play.³⁸

The escalatory dynamics of the “hot war” scenario would be something that India would prefer to avoid because the asymmetric power ratios are aligned against India, especially when Pakistan, as a serious military state siding with China, would be a considerable challenge for India to handle on its own. Although the Indian military has drawn plans for a two-front war, experts have warned that it may not be sustainable because it would be cost-prohibitive both in terms of manpower and weapons acquisition and deployment.³⁹ Both China and Pakistan are revisionist states that are intent on redrawing the borders by gaining territory that is in effective control or claimed by other states,⁴⁰ Pakistan's national ambition is in wresting Indian controlled Kashmir away from India, which it believes to be the unfinished business of the partition of British India in 1947.⁴¹

India is a defensive state seeking to maintain the *status quo*—a point acknowledged by Chinese strategists, but not by Pakistan—and domestic stability without conceding additional territorial or political space to two of its most powerful neighbors. Although there is a stream of political thought in India that visualizes a modern territorial India—*Abkand Bharat*, Greater India or undivided India—stretching from Afghanistan to Tibet, which includes Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar in its territorial

imagination, it remains a mere dream.⁴² India has made peaceful territorial settlements with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Nepal,⁴³ which includes territorial transfers, and maritime boundary limitation agreements with all the littoral states, and it has a river water agreement with Pakistan (Indus Water Treaty 1960).⁴⁴ Hence territorial expansion, especially through application of military force, is not within the policy demesne of India in the foreseeable future. Although there is a lot of political rhetoric of retaking Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) and the parts of Kashmir (Shaksgam Tract), which Pakistan transferred through treaty in 1963 to China, it is unlikely that India would realistically seek to claim it through military force and as it is not practical or likely to be successful.⁴⁵

For India, the *grand bargain* scenario would be the preferred outcome—a negotiated outcome accompanied by a territorial settlement without a large-scale military conflict—but China may not prefer this outcome because it believes that it could achieve through force and/or through coercion an outcome determinedly in its favor. China could attain its ultimate objective of occupying the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh located in the northeast corner of India bordering China and Myanmar and it could determine a boundary to its satisfaction to permanently squash the Tibetan uprising, and acquire additional territory from Nepal and Bhutan by using political coercion.⁴⁶ Even though military action would be prohibitively costly even for Beijing, it is not improbable. The People's Republic has shown that it has both the political will and military capacity to pursue aggressive strategies to occupy territory as it has shown with the ruthless crackdown in Hong Kong and Xinjiang.

But tactical issues such as high altitude and inhospitable terrain along the Indo-Tibet frontier areas will impose serious restrictions on flexible land based military operations against a large and capable military such as India. The rate at which the Indian Army and the Chinese PLA can surge soldiers to the border will depend on their gradual acclimatization to higher altitudes.⁴⁷ Moving supplies and military equipment to this high altitude will be daunting and rather expensive proposition for both countries, despite significant advancement in border infrastructure both on the Chinese and Indian sides. Large-scale military escalation always remains a very high probability because the two opposing militaries are literally few feet from each other and they have frequently engaged in physical altercation using clubs and nail studded iron rods.⁴⁸ Fighting involving military armaments resulted in significant casualties in 1962, minor casualties in 1975, and substantial casualties most recently in June 2020 (see Table 19.1).

WHAT ARE THE CHANCES OF A LARGE-SCALE MILITARY CONFLICT BETWEEN CHINA AND INDIA?

India and China have already fought once in 1962 in which the Chinese were able to teach India a “lesson” as Chairman Mao intended.⁴⁹ Furthermore, India and China have engaged in multiple military skirmishes along the border since 1962 to assert their interpretation of the border on each other. China’s military occupation of Tibet in 1959 and the 1962 war were turning points in the mutual relations between these two Asian states (see Table 19.1). The military clashes since 1962 have shaped this fraught rivalry, but the brutal clash in the Galwan Valley on June 15, 2020 was the first confrontation along the border since 1975 that have caused fatalities on both sides. The literature on enduring rivalries assert that tangible markers, particularly territorial disputes, make a rivalry particularly difficult to resolve.⁵⁰ Non-fatal confrontations and territorial incursions frequently occur along the border (see Table 19.3), and the series of confidence building measures along the border in 1993, 1996, and 2013 were designed to maintain peace and tranquility along the border region.⁵¹ Despite effective crisis management, frequent military clashes between India and China is more likely in comparison to the probability of a war between the United States and China because of the outstanding territorial dispute, in which China wants to slice more and more territory and India is hoping to defend the Line of Actual Control.

Table 19.3: Border Incursions/Transgressions/Incidents on the LAC

Year	Western Sector	Middle Sector	Eastern Sector	Total
2019	497	28	138	663
2018	284	31	89	404
2017	337	17	119	473
2016	208	17	71	296
2015	342	9	77	428

The 4,057 km border is divided into three sectors (Western, Middle, and Eastern).

Data Source: Indian Express, 22 May 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/aksai-chin-army-big-surge-in-chinese-transgressions-most-of-them-in-ladakh-6421674/> (as Reported by the Indian Ministry of Defense/Ministry of External Affairs; PRC does not report any such data publicly)

As the stronger actor in this conflict, China need not remain as committed to conflict management, diplomacy, and peaceful settlement because the onus of such activities is on the relatively weaker party. As its power continues to ascend and its military capabilities accelerates, Beijing believes that it could assert its military dominance over India whenever it wants. Beijing has pursued a more hardline stance with India with the “three no’s” policy of “no weakness, no concession and no defensive defense.”⁵² Hardliners in Beijing are urging the government to hit India hard and make it an example so that it will deter American ambitions against China. Meanwhile, undeterred India has been pursuing interoperability agreements with the United States. The U.S.-India Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) intends to facilitate “access to advanced defense systems and enable India to optimally utilize its existing US-origin platforms.”⁵³ Indian and U.S. forces also engaged in a joint tri-services exercise titled Tiger Triumph in November 2019.⁵⁴

The probability of a large-scale conventional military conflict between India and China remains high because even though India is on the receiving end of the asymmetry scale, it is unlikely that it will not counter Chinese military action.⁵⁵ What is even more salient in this case is that conflict resolution between asymmetric contestants is less likely since “the stronger player will always choose outright conflict because the benefits of conflict exceed the expected value of the random allocation.”⁵⁶ More than mere military balance, what is really crucial is the identity value attached to the contested territory that is central to the national imagination in the contesting countries.

Presently, the territorial conflict between India and China is the 900-pound elephant in the room. India and China can dance around it with negotiations and rounds of bilateral talks at various levels, but the territorial conflict has persisted since the birth of modern India and China. This territorial conflict is at the root of this enduring rivalry. As with all territorial disputes, both parties perceive this as a zero-sum conflict in which they cannot afford to lose face, back down, or concede to the other party, particularly when national identities are deeply intertwined with these territories.

China especially believes that it has the upper hand and the time for territorial concessions and grand bargains has elapsed. In India the memories of a military defeat at the hands of the Chinese PLA in 1962, the persistent border skirmishes, and overwhelming insecurity dominate strategic thinking. Defense and strategic thinking in India has now diverged from

its exclusive focus on Pakistan to elevate China to a major threat. There is persistent defense narrative emerging in India that emphasizes the need to prepare for a two-front war.⁵⁷ In both countries competing nationalist narratives govern how the general population understand this conflict.

Any territorial settlement must be willing to accommodate competing and harsh nationalist reactions in which territorial concessions to the rival would be seen as a defeat and humiliation.⁵⁸ India is the weaker party in this asymmetric conflict and it is the status quo power seeking to hold on to its territory as it confronts the Chinese PLA across the Himalayan frontier that has amassed vast military resources in several locations along the contentious Line of Actual Control (LAC). India's defensive posture is routinely challenged by China along the border. According to data collected and released by the Indian government, the PLA transgressed the boundary area "1025 times between 2016 and 2018"⁵⁹ (see Table 19.3). From January to April 2020, India has recorded 170 border transgressions across the LAC, of which 130 incidents have occurred in Ladakh alone.

IS NUCLEAR EXCHANGE PROBABLE BETWEEN INDIA AND CHINA?

In an opinion piece in the Indian Express newspaper, retired Indian Admiral Arun Prakash outlined the possibility of a nuclear exchange between India and China as follows:

While Indian troops have, so far, shown courage and restraint in these ridiculous brawls with the PLA, there is no guarantee that in a future melee, a punch on the nose will not invite a bullet in response. In such circumstances, rapid escalation into a "shoot-ing-war" cannot be ruled out. Thereafter, should either side face a major military set-back, resort to nuclear "first-use" would pose a serious temptation.

The control for this situation is the policy of "no first use" (NFU) nuclear doctrine adopted by China and India, but not by Pakistan.⁶⁰ Although the Indian defense minister has made some noise about following a flexible nuclear doctrine, it is unlikely that India would launch a nuclear first strike against China and the same would apply to China.⁶¹ Nuclear weapons are primarily intended to serve as a deterrent. A nuclear attack by India on China would invite an overwhelming second-strike and produce unpredictable fallout. Similarly a first strike nuclear attack by China on

India is equally inconceivable, as India has also developed second-strike capability through submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), long-range ground launched ballistic missiles, and potentially it could air deliver such weapons through bombers and fighter jets.⁶²

The idea of first-strike Indian nuclear launch against China or a Chinese nuclear attack on India given the current political trajectory and because of the NFU policy is not within the realm of possibility, but a conventional war along the LAC is a high likelihood and there is very strong historical precedence for it. More importantly China believes that its superior conventional military power is sufficient to subdue India; hence there would be little need for China to attack India with nuclear weapons or even issue any nuclear threats or warnings to deter India. China's size and its military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities are sufficient to deter India from engaging in any military adventurism.⁶³ With regard to intentions, Beijing does not believe that New Delhi intends to either initiate a conventional or a nuclear war against China. This is because India's position vis-à-vis China is preservative—hold the territory and continue negotiations—and it is unlikely that India would pursue unprovoked and unilateral military action against a superior adversary.⁶⁴ India is preparing a defensive strategy by building up its military capacity and infrastructure along the border to prevent any encroachment by the People's Liberation Army.⁶⁵

INDIA'S EXTERNAL BALANCING AND THE INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

Countering China has required that India move ever closer to the United States, the only country that has the capability and alignment of national interest in confronting China's rise. India is a Major Defense Partner of the United States, but not a defense ally. The United States and India are starting to deliberate about plans and intentions to ensure policies are aligned to optimize shared security interests in the Indo-Pacific region. But India has been reticent about fully committing to a formal alliance with the United States not only to retain its strategic autonomy, but also because it does not want to aggravate China in the hopes of pursuing a political reset and eventual peaceful territorial settlement. India is attempting to balance against China by leaning ever closer to the United States by bolstering its defense and economic ties. The current belief within the corridors of the Ministry of External Affairs is that the time for direct confrontation, especially military confrontation and political provocation, is unnecessary

at this juncture, but this situation could change in the long run.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, India has started procuring large quantities of defense equipment from the United States. Most recently, during President Trump's visit to India in February 2020, India signed an arms deal worth 3.5 billion dollars with more deals in the offing down the road.⁶⁷

The Indian goal appears to be aimed at shoring up its defensive options without leading to overt military conflagration with China. India has also reached out selectively to the ASEAN countries, namely Vietnam and to some extent Indonesia, in an effort to strengthen counterbalancing alliances against China. India has revived the Quad (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) and engaged with the Quad Plus, a strategic consultation framework involving the United States, Australia, Japan and India and additional partners such as South Korea, New Zealand, and Vietnam.⁶⁸ But the objectives of all these moves and countermoves are fundamentally defensive in nature and it is not aimed to militarily confront China.

Beijing also continues to exploit India's vulnerabilities in other venues, such as trade and through its Belt and Road Initiative, to assert its economic and political power. China has thwarted Indian ambitions for membership in key international organizations such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG)⁶⁹ and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) by often deploying Pakistan as a proxy in these diplomatic battles.⁷⁰ Beijing is also supporting Pakistan's claim over Kashmir in international forums and by introducing resolutions in the United Nations condemning India's policies in Jammu and Kashmir.⁷¹ All these efforts are aimed at keeping the political pressure dialed-up in multiple forums and prevent New Delhi from expanding its political reach beyond the region.

India aims to avoid direct military conflict with China as much as possible, while preparing the defenses for such an eventuality. Both India and China are likely to allow the current *status quo* to continue as long as both parties don't attempt to unilaterally alter it. However, if China attempts to alter the shape of the LAC by changing the facts on the ground, it will produce a military standoff as it did in Daulat Beg Oldi in 2013, in Doklam in 2017, and in Pangong Tso, Galwan Valley, and Hot Springs in 2020.⁷² All these situations produced long military standoffs, which were eventually reconciled through sustained diplomatic negotiations. Beijing's encroachments have continuously intensified and it has perpetually demanded additional territory involving many thousands of square kilometers, while India has attempted to forestall ever increasing territorial encroachment by attempting to negotiate such situations with China.⁷³ But these temporary

agreements have only served to calm the periodic territorial standoffs as they have not produced any lasting agreements, and it has emboldened Beijing to pursue even more expansive claims with aggressive posture. Modernization of Chinese military equipment and road-rail linkages into the Tibetan plateau has only made China's territorial claims even more acute.⁷⁴ Although India is attempting to match Beijing's development of the frontier areas, it is being thwarted because Beijing has the first-mover advantage in money, manpower, technology, and equipment, which has increased its bargaining power vis-à-vis India. But it is not certain that every future situation could be always addressed through negotiations in every instance, which increases the prospect of wider escalation as the frequency and intensity of these border clashes increase.

To maintain the prevailing status quo India will seek to create diplomatic counter-balance options by developing stronger military ties to the United States and regional states such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Vietnam.⁷⁵ But at the same time, India is unlikely to permit any anti-Chinese activities to be carried out from its territory or allow any official criticisms of Chinese policy regarding Xinjiang and Hong Kong or matters that are sensitive to the Chinese government such as the tenuous political status of Taiwan. All of these measures are aimed at not aggravating the Chinese government. India will continue to sustain high-level bilateral diplomacy with China in an effort to maintain good relations.

As the weaker power in this asymmetric relationship, India realizes that China's patience with India may suddenly run out and that Beijing will not hesitate to use military force to resolve the border issue to its satisfaction. But given the current trends, it is difficult to forecast that the India-China border conflict will be resolved through bilateral diplomacy alone unless there is a fundamental change in the perceptions of both governments. Given the zero-sum preferences associated with territorial conflict, it is more likely that the *status quo* will be repeatedly disrupted making a *hot war* more likely rather than less likely, unless a *grand bargain* is struck.

INTERNAL BALANCING AND DOMESTIC FACTORS IN PREDICTING CONFLICT OUTCOMES

It would be equally difficult to envisage that China would not be tempted to rely on its superior military and diplomatic capability to gradually erode India's resolve and force it to accept a situation which may not be to India's liking. As the literature on enduring rivalries suggests, an external shock

that is either exogenous or endogenous to the rivalry dynamics might be required to break the stable conflict equilibrium that currently governs the India-China conflict.⁷⁶

The possibility of a border settlement not only depends on the national perceptions of where the borders of each country begin and end along the 4,057 km LAC, but it also depends on a confluence of domestic factors. China is facing a variety of domestic political challenges that is testing the limits of its governance. Beijing is routinely resorting to reflexive authoritarianism and more government resources are being diverted to confront threat of the coronavirus, which emerged in Wuhan city in Hubei Province and it is causing a global pandemic of monumental proportions. In India, the episodic outbreak of inter-religious violence, mass protests over aspects of domestic policies, returning migrant workers, and the economic slowdown caused by the spread of the coronavirus have preoccupied the state and local governments.

China is facing a looming demographic deficit,⁷⁷ whereas India is likely to experience a demographic dividend with a young and able workforce.⁷⁸ India on the other hand is facing several fissiparous domestic political movements that might threaten the stability of the union of India. Though Beijing is facing a crisis of domestic political legitimacy, it has taken to technological control mechanisms, such as the application of facial recognition technology, internet policing, and the social credit system, accompanied by violent suppression, as in the case of Hong Kong, to manage domestic opposition.⁷⁹

Despite the high level summits in October 11-12, 2019 between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi in Mamallapuram in Tamil Nadu, India and the Wuhan Informal Summit in Wuhan, China from April 27-28, 2018, widening gaps in mutual perceptions prevail and it is likely to continue into the future. The former Indian diplomat TCA Srinivasan Raghavan describes “China as a paranoid and opportunistic neighbor with an exaggerated sense of entitlement.”⁸⁰ Raghavan’s sentiments correctly encapsulate the predominant view in India. The May-June 2020 military clash along the LAC has hardened Indian sentiments towards China.⁸¹

A majority of Indians hold unfavorable view of China (41%); only 26 percent of Indians hold a favorable view of China according a Pew Research Survey conducted in 2017.⁸² In comparison, 49% of Indians hold a favorable view of the United States with only 9% holding an unfavorable view.⁸³ In the same survey, 56% of India views China’s growing military

strength as a bad thing. In another recent survey, two-thirds of the Indian respondents identified China as a bigger problem than Pakistan.⁸⁴ Fear, anxiety, and mistrust of China pervades in the Indian strategic community. Most recent Chinese incursion in the LAC has further worsened China's already dwindling popularity in India. The Indian Army chief, General M. M. Naravane, addressing a gathering, argued that China has "created this aura of China being the undisputed military leader" without firing a single shot or inviting counteraction. General Naravane argued that India needs to learn how to deal with "non-contact or grey-zone warfare."⁸⁵

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we discussed three scenarios—*Status quo*, *Grand Bargain*, and *Hot War*—that are possible conflict pathways between India and China. In the next 0 to 15 years, a *grand bargain* for a border settlement seems highly improbable, if not impossible, which would make *status quo* the default option particularly for India. India is interested in ensuring that an escalatory war does not breakout with China while it is battling a global pandemic and drawing up plans to revive its economy. In the next 15 to 30 years, any and all of the scenarios are likely to prevail. However, the expectation is that if a *grand bargain* is not struck, then the possibilities of a *hot war* become increasingly higher. It is a safe bet to make that the *status quo* is unlikely to prevail in the long duration—15 years and beyond—because by that time the expectation is that a *grand bargain* will be negotiated or there will be a military clash, assuming that other things remain the same. There are also few other possibilities such as India could experience significant domestic political upheaval causing some states to secede or they attempt to secede, testing the territorial union of India. Pakistan and India could go to war over a terror attack that may have its origins in Pakistan.

A conventional war would significantly weaken India and Pakistan, and worse yet a nuclear war would dramatically destroy both countries and its population, effectively rendering the territorial designs dead. Another major global pandemic could weaken China's authoritarian control over its citizens, making domestic political change plausible or there could be a military clash between United States and China as posited by the *Thucydides Trap*, which encourages India to take a far more assertive posture against China. Domestic politics and leadership change within China could also change in such a way that it forces the country to reconsider the aggressive path it is pursuing with regards to trade and territorial disputes. Beijing's actions against India have mirrored similar efforts to its territorial claims in

South China Sea. Chinese Navy and other assorted vessels have menaced fishing and research vessels from Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia.⁸⁶ Beijing's aggressiveness with regards to South China Sea disputes could lead to the formation of an alliance against China in which various countries from the Indo-Pacific could form an alliance to lead a fightback against expansive Chinese maritime claims.

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