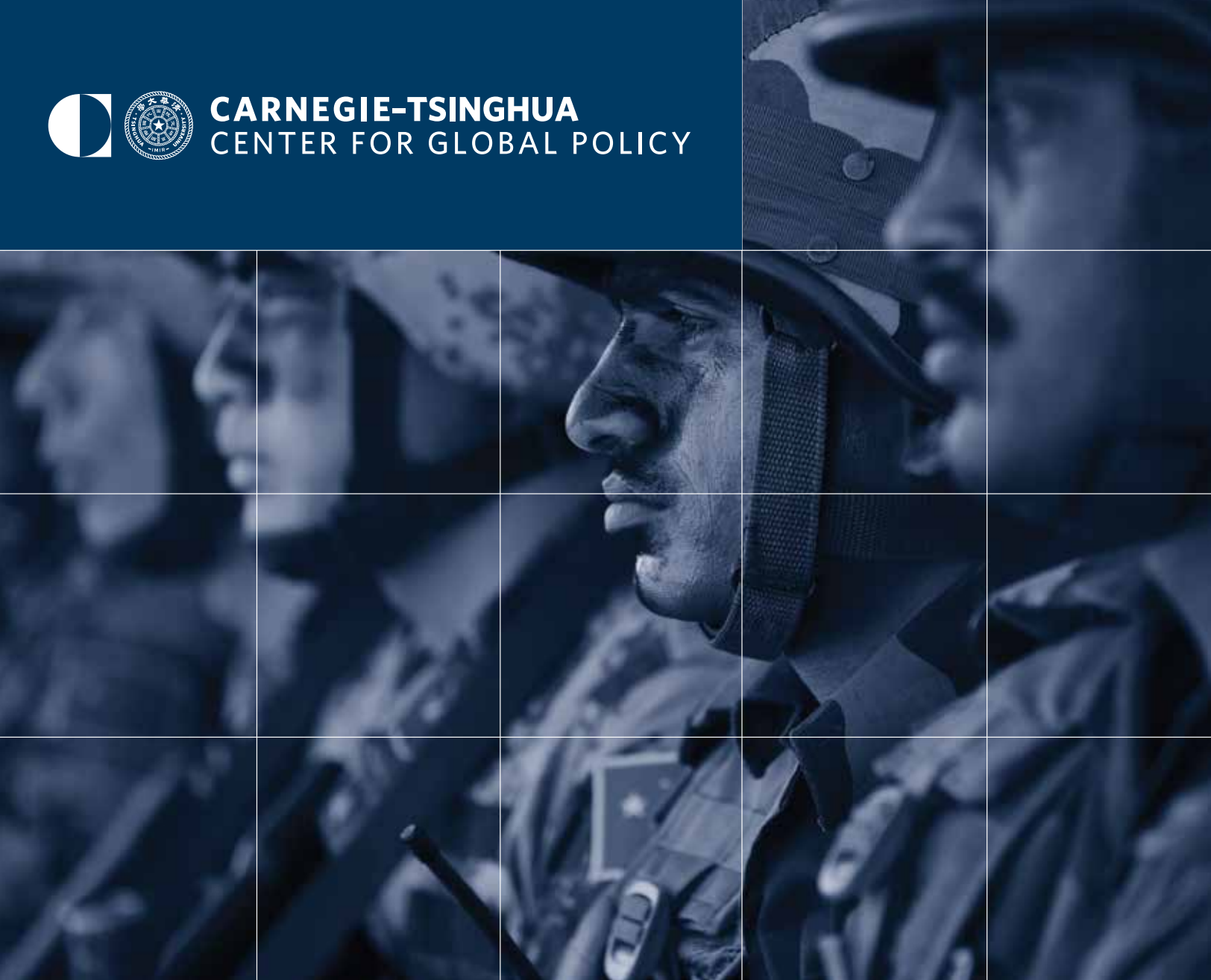




CARNEGIE-TSINGHUA
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STABILIZING SINO-INDIAN SECURITY RELATIONS

Managing Strategic Rivalry After Doklam

Frank O'Donnell

JUNE 2018



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About the Author

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Summary

The Doklam standoff between Chinese and Indian troops in the summer of 2017 coincided with an ongoing deterioration in bilateral relations and accelerated preexisting security dilemma dynamics. China's and India's respective military postures, and the perceptions these developments engender on both sides, indicate a path forward. These nuclear rivals should take steps to stabilize their relationship and reduce the chances of conflict.

Old Territories, New Challenges

Perception-fueled military competition: Both capitals exhibit declining confidence in their mutual ability to peacefully settle their differences. Many Indian strategists believe China seeks to militarily dominate disputed border areas. Similarly, many Chinese analysts attribute India's bolder military posturing to a desire for great power status, rather than defensive responses to perceived Chinese aggression.

India's conventional military advantage: Once its conventional force modernization is complete, India will be able to position far more troops near border areas than China, whose forces are mostly located deeper inland. U.S. intelligence-sharing will likely enable India to detect and counteract any Chinese mobilizations in case of a major attack. Contrary to Indian assumptions, these factors grant India key conventional advantages over China, despite the latter's superior mobilization logistics.

Differing views on nuclear deterrence: New Delhi assesses that Beijing will only view India's nuclear deterrent as credible once India can deploy missiles, such as the Agni-V, that can reach Beijing and Shanghai. Chinese strategists assert that such Indian targeting goals are unnecessary for stable bilateral deterrence, despite China's larger, superior nuclear arsenal. Yet some indications suggest that Agni-III missiles already have been deployed in northeastern India, which would mean these Chinese targets are already within range.

New Pathways Toward Stability

Enhanced military-to-military contact: India has proposed the establishment of a hotline between Indian Army Headquarters and PLA Army Headquarters to allow the two sides to immediately clarify security concerns at a more senior directive level, as a complement to existing tactical-level contact. This headquarters-level hotline should be paired with a theater-level channel between relevant Chinese and Indian commanders. Such communication channels would help correct potential misinterpretations between Indian and Chinese defense policymakers.

A comprehensive strategic and nuclear dialogue: China and India should establish processes to explain their respective nuclear and conventional doctrinal policies, describe their force posturing intentions, and discuss potential procedures for prenotification of missile tests and major military exercises.

Unilateral Chinese gestures: As the stronger power, China should recognize how its far-reaching border incursions and construction programs in disputed areas elevate Indian threat perceptions. Beijing should unilaterally cease such activities to help lower bilateral tensions.

Introduction

The Doklam crisis of June to August 2017 involved Indian military efforts to block Chinese strategic road construction in an area of disputed ownership between China and Bhutan. Despite the limited territorial scope of this military interaction, the crisis between Beijing and New Delhi quickly escalated to include mutual force buildups near that area and an exchange of explicit war threats. China eventually withdrew some of its forces from Doklam. Yet Chinese and Indian policymakers seem to agree that the deterioration of the bilateral relationship began before and extends beyond last summer's crisis.

The central challenge for New Delhi and Beijing is to reverse the decline in strategic trust, and the resulting rise of security dilemma dynamics between them, by addressing the two countries' struggles to understand each other's strategic responses and modulate their own policy responses accordingly. Indeed, as an Indian strategic affairs expert has observed, "The Doklam stand-off needs to be seen for what it was: an indication of the steady deterioration in the ability of India and China to deal with such situations."¹

The Doklam episode occurred against a backdrop of gradual modernizations of military forces and logistical networks along the Sino-Indian border that have affected the two countries' perceptions of each other. The situation at Doklam also brought into sharp focus several tension points in the Sino-Indian strategic rivalry. For example, many Chinese analysts believe that India seeks to attain the status of a world power in direct competition with China, and that recent Indian force developments (such as the development and placement of Brahmos missiles near disputed border areas) signal provocative, offensive Indian intentions.² India perceives the same developments as limited efforts to ensure a credible defensive deterrent against Chinese force modernizations, in the hope that a stronger Indian military position will encourage Beijing to finally settle border questions with New Delhi.³

China's own military modernization efforts largely focus on developing transport links, and other logistical infrastructure, from its interior right up to border areas with India. Simultaneously, China is restructuring its military around the general principle of a more proactive, offensive posture while

The situation at Doklam . . . brought into sharp focus several tension points in the Sino-Indian strategic rivalry.

continuing a pattern of regular border incursions that occasionally extend to patrolling forces refusing to move for weeks at a time. These Chinese initiatives magnify strategic tensions with New Delhi, generating demand within India for the Brahmos and other force-posturing developments that Beijing in turn finds destabilizing.

While a November 2017 bilateral diplomatic summit reiterated pro forma language that “maintenance of peace and tranquility in the border areas is an important prerequisite for sustained growth of bilateral relations,” there are nevertheless early indications that both China and India are learning specific lessons from Doklam that threaten to further exacerbate strategic tensions.⁴ Indian leaders are provocatively boasting of the experience as a victory, while the Indian Army has announced more comprehensive military infrastructure development along all areas of the disputed border to quickly respond to further Chinese incursions.⁵ Meanwhile, one Chinese foreign policy expert warned in the *PLA Daily* that “India should be more realistic in that China will not lose if a military conflict erupts after another border dispute.”⁶ State media outlets and other prominent Chinese analysts affiliated with official institutions have recently echoed this point, including a senior strategist at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations who asserted that “In the past, we thought we would shelve differences. Now, we will face them squarely.”⁷

An April 2018 meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping ostensibly served to lower the diplomatic temperature in the rivalry, but it remains unlikely that this meeting will alter the relationship’s trajectory in policy terms. The central achievement of the summit, according to India’s Ministry of External Affairs, was that both Beijing and New Delhi would issue “strategic guidance to their respective militaries to strengthen communication in order to build trust and mutual understanding and enhance predictability and effectiveness in the management of border affairs.”⁸ This initiative importantly included progress toward establishing a military-to-military hotline between the Indian Army and Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA), as reported solely by Indian defense sources.⁹

However, it is telling that neither this hotline nor the overarching “military strategic guidance” commitment were referenced in the Chinese statement following the talks. Instead, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs referred to a more vague understanding that “The two militaries will enhance confidence building measures and border defense exchanges and cooperation.”¹⁰ This difference of understanding—on the key accomplishment of a summit specifically designed to develop mutual understanding of strategic concerns—indicates that little progress has been made in stabilizing their security relationship. This point is underscored by the fact that a joint summit statement with a single agreed-upon text was not even seriously considered.

To address the challenge of stabilizing security relations, Chinese and Indian policymakers should adopt three policy recommendations. First, New

Delhi and Beijing should establish bilateral military-to-military communication links at the national and theater levels. Given that the Indian Army and the PLA both play primary roles in interpreting each other's intentions and activities for their respective countries' policymakers, this measure would build greater clarity into their strategic interactions, and reduce the potential for military mobilization based on misinterpretations. Second, China and India should initiate a strategic and nuclear dialogue to reduce mutual threat perceptions and enable regularized direct discussion of bilateral issues of concern. Such an institutionalized dialogue could also serve as a platform for negotiating and concluding future confidence-building measures. Third, as the stronger power in the rivalry, China should unilaterally cease provocative border activities, such as construction projects and incursions on territory disputed with India. These actions significantly elevate Indian threat perceptions, which create demands for a more robust Indian defense posture against China and limit China's progress toward its expressed goal of a peaceful partnership with India. These three recommendations have the potential to help as New Delhi and Beijing seek to avoid a further increase in bilateral tensions.

The Impact of Indian Force Posturing

Developments in India's conventional and nuclear military posturing over the last decade, and striking differences in how Beijing and New Delhi perceive these advancements, have contributed to the sense of strategic rivalry and mistrust between the two countries. The rise of increasingly aggressive sentiments from Chinese and Indian analysts regarding their future security relationship are even more striking, given that China still does not consider India to be its primary geostrategic rival and that India, until recently, was more focused on Pakistan-centric defense contingencies and planning.

Indian Conventional Military Developments

Until the mid-2000s, New Delhi refused to upgrade the poor condition of its military roads near the border with China, out of the apparent belief that such shoddy transport links would slow down the inevitable Chinese cross-border advance that would take place in the event of a war, allowing additional time for Indian forces to be mobilized from the interior.¹¹ Two Indian defense experts reflected such thinking when they once remarked that the "single-lane road to Tawang at most places is nothing more than a dirt track where vehicles get routinely stuck for hours."¹²

In 2004, however, then prime minister Manmohan Singh and his military chiefs began to consider enhancing India's military presence and readiness along its border areas with China for defensive purposes. As a former brigadier close to defense policymaking observed, the "military asymmetry could

become too pronounced to be manageable” if India did not make efforts to bolster its military capabilities directed against China.¹³ In 2006, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), India’s highest defense decisionmaking body, authorized the construction of seventy-three new border roads to improve military connectivity and responsiveness.¹⁴ As of September 2017, only twenty-seven of these roads have been completed, indicating that logistical mobility remains an issue for the Indian Army.¹⁵

India is gradually increasing its ground and air forces along its land border with China. Two new divisions—the Fifty-Sixth and Seventy-First Mountain Divisions, which encompass around 35,000 troops—were raised for Arunachal Pradesh defense missions in 2009–2010. The divisions have been equipped with artillery and T-90 tanks, matériel normally used for penetrating assaults.¹⁶ The establishment of the Seventeenth Mountain Strike Corps, scheduled for full induction by 2021, will add approximately another 35,000 troops to India’s ground posture against China. This new corps will be India’s first

India is gradually increasing its ground and air forces along its land border with China.

China-specific strike corps built to launch forward offensives into Chinese territory; it will include two armor brigades, two infantry divisions, and an artillery division.¹⁷ In addition, in August 2016, the Indian Army positioned 120 T-72M1 tanks in the plains of Ladakh in eastern Kashmir, an area that witnessed Chinese advances in the 1962 war between the two countries.¹⁸

Once these new formations are fully raised, India will be able to draw on an estimated 221,000 forces in the Western, Central, and Eastern Army Commands close to the border; the majority of these units are located far closer to the actual border than their Chinese counterparts.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the Indian Air Force (IAF) is acquiring Sukhoi Su-30MKI and Dassault Rafale fighter aircraft and opening multiple new advanced landing grounds (ALGs)—runways close to the border that can act as logistical and attack staging posts. These new runways will both improve India’s air power flexibility and increase the number of airfields that China would have to attempt to seize or eliminate in a conflict.

These military developments mean that Chinese analysts perceive India to be increasingly more dedicated to offensive military posturing as opposed to peaceful dialogue and economic cooperation. This perception is elevating hostility toward India within this body of Chinese discourse, and generating pessimism among Chinese observers regarding the possibility of nonmilitary ways of stabilizing the strategic relationship. While it is still too soon to see how these darkening attitudes might be translated into policy—such as the creation or permanent movement of new Chinese forces closer to Indian border areas—China’s shifting strategic perceptions of India heighten the potential for Chinese policy to move in this direction.

Indian Nuclear Developments

Beyond these conventional military developments, the absence of substantive strategic dialogue between China and India, including on their respective nuclear intentions, is further driving the security dilemma between the two countries. As a result, misperceptions that can shape policymaking on both sides are going uncorrected.

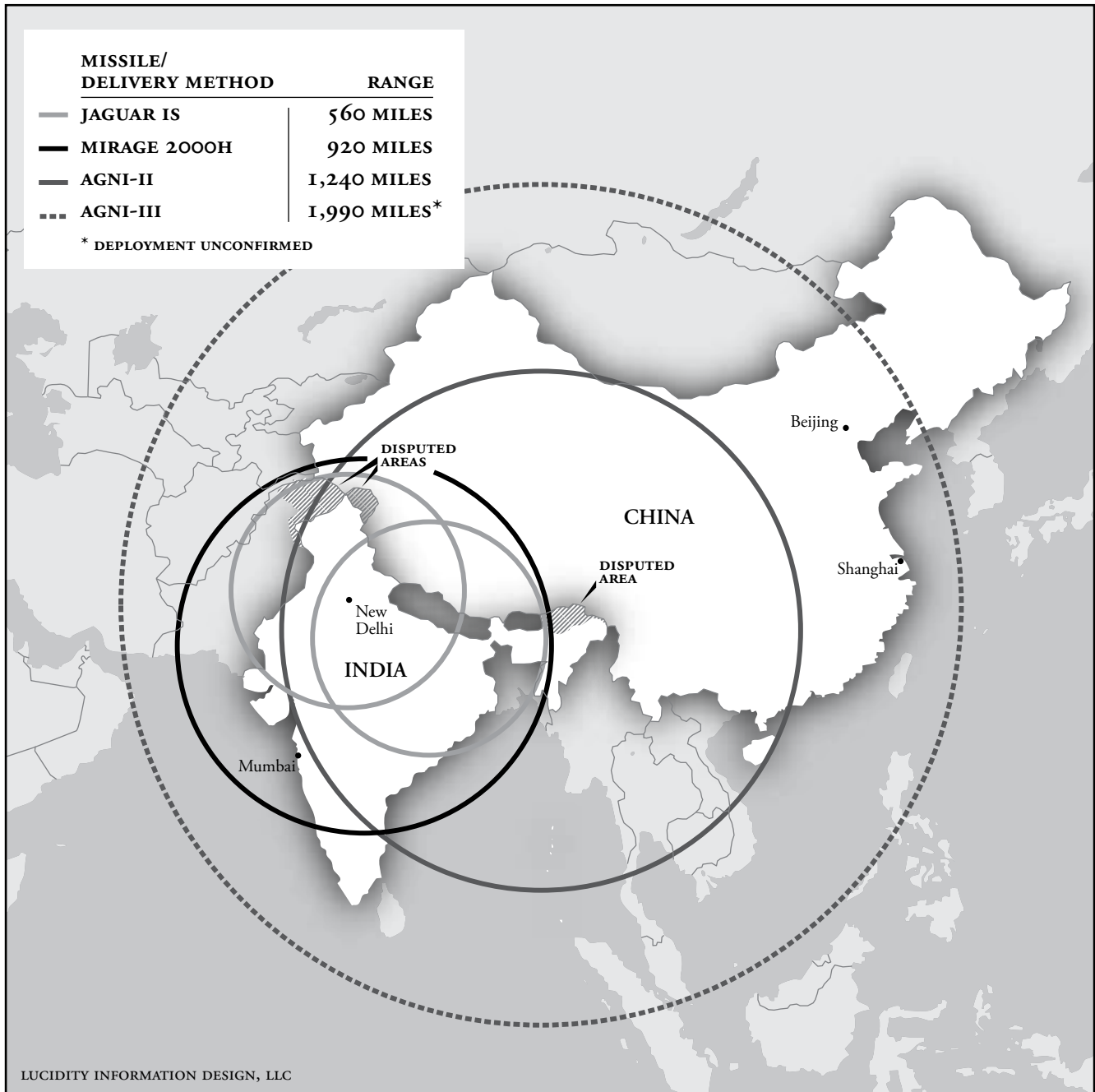
The sophistication and range of India's strategic nuclear forces have long paled in comparison to those of China. External experts have commonly concluded that India's nuclear arsenal presently can only hold Tibet and parts of southwestern China at risk, in contrast to Beijing's ability to deploy multiple nuclear missile types that can reach any target in India.²⁰ An authoritative external analysis by Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris judged that India has positioned one nuclear-certified squadron of Jaguar IS fighters at each of its Ambala and Gorakhpur air force bases and one or two nuclear-certified squadrons of Mirage 2000H fighters at the air force base at Gwalior.²¹ These fighters, equipped with nuclear gravity bombs, form a crucial element of the nuclear threat India poses to southwestern China.

However, the U.S. National Air and Space Intelligence Center (NASIC) and the aforementioned authoritative external analysis by Kristensen and Norris both have assessed that India has begun deploying the 2,000-kilometer-range Agni-II and 3,200-kilometer-range Agni-III missiles.²² The Indian Ministry of Defense claimed that the Agni-III was "in the arsenal of the armed forces" in 2014; meanwhile, a spokesperson for the Indian Army's China-facing Eastern Command asserted back in 2008 that the missile brought Shanghai (and, by extension, less-distant Beijing) into Indian nuclear range. However, Kristensen and Norris still claim that the missile's "full operational status is uncertain."²³

There is evidence, although not conclusive proof, that these missiles have been deployed in northeastern India. In order for the Agni-III to reach Shanghai and Beijing in line with the Indian Army Eastern Command's stated operational expectations, the missile would have to be based in northeastern India, a fact highlighted by Kristensen and Norris and illustrated in figure 1 below.²⁴ Furthermore, additional recent evidence—gathered by intelligence and private sources from three Asian states—suggests (but does not definitely confirm) that India may have fielded both Agni-II and Agni-III missiles in India's northeastern state of Assam. Figure 1 provides a full picture of the author's assessment of which China-facing nuclear forces seem likely to have been deployed based on the aforementioned sources.²⁵ If this is the case, this placement of the Agni-IIIs would mean that India holds Beijing, Shanghai, and all other significant Chinese population and military targets at nuclear risk.

NASIC estimates that fewer than ten Agni-III launchers have been deployed, and Kristensen and Norris assess this number to be around eight.²⁶ If and when these missiles are fully operationalized in Assam, this small Indian

Figure 1. India's Estimated China-Facing Nuclear Forces



Sources: Online resources from various think tank researchers, private companies, and intelligence documents. See endnote 23 for more details.

Note: This map depicts the author's assessment of all Indian nuclear forces able to reach Chinese targets that have been (or are likely to have been) deployed.

nuclear force would pose a nuclear *risk* to locations on China's east coast, rather than a *certain* ability to strike such targets. Such a posture would adhere to the minimum deterrence logic that has long informed both Indian and Chinese nuclear thought.

If India were to attempt to be assured of a *certain* ability to destroy targets on China's east coast by developing a much larger number of long-range missiles and a larger arsenal of nuclear warheads, this latter approach would more closely align with the alternative logic of maximalist deterrence. This school of thought holds that nuclear deterrence can only be established when a country attains numerical and destructive supremacy, or at least parity, vis-à-vis its nuclear rivals.²⁷ By contrast, minimalists judge that this maximalist condition is unnecessary for nuclear deterrence to operate and that a small, survivable nuclear force is enough to create enough *risk* of nuclear retaliation that an adversary will be deterred from first nuclear use.²⁸

If one assumes that India is deploying Agni-III missiles in northeastern India, then the country has already established a minimalist deterrence against China. Any Indian movements toward developing a larger, longer-range nuclear arsenal would undermine its stated adherence to minimum deterrence, a nuclear posture that entails minimizing arsenal size and the role of nuclear weapons in national defense. These efforts would signal to China and other adversaries that India seeks to unnecessarily elevate the role of nuclear weapons in their strategic relationships, an approach that would risk generating further strategic tensions.²⁹ Indeed, a Chinese expert has already remarked that “the fact that India's nuclear weapons can reach Chengdu has the same [deterrence] effect [on China] as being able to reach Beijing.”³⁰ Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Indian strategic planners would be satisfied with limiting their retaliatory nuclear reach to Chengdu.

However, the full operationalization of Agni-III forces in northeastern India would create a credible risk that India could achieve nuclear retaliation against any significant Chinese target. If and when that is the case, further arsenal expansions, including the development of the 5,000-kilometer-range Agni-V and nuclear-armed submarine fleet, would be unnecessary for the Indian goal of attaining nuclear deterrence against China. Indeed, the aforementioned Chinese expert also remarked that “It doesn't matter to China if one day India achieves numerical nuclear force parity with China . . . I'm happy to see India wasting their money on more nuclear weapons.”³¹ This Chinese impression—that India is building its nuclear arsenal to wield a destructive capability beyond what is required for deterring China—reinforces the underlying view among Chinese analysts that India's military modernization is principally driven by its quest for offensive great-power

[China fears] that India's military modernization is principally driven by its quest for offensive great-power competition with China.

competition with China, rather than as a limited, defensive response to Indian perceptions of Chinese aggression.

India continues to adhere to a policy of no first use for nuclear weapons and, from New Delhi's perspective, these nuclear developments are in line with the overarching Indian perception that a credible defense must give India the ability to threaten Chinese mainland targets. This new attitude—replacing the pre-2006 approach that an entirely defensive stance would best assure Indian security against China—assumes that greater Chinese strategic caution toward India would be induced if India can pose these credible offensive strike capabilities. This approach contrasts with New Delhi's previous preference to rely on poor internal border infrastructure to slow down a Chinese offensive and give more Indian forces sufficient time to arrive. India's new thinking extends to both conventional and nuclear posturing transitions, including the formation of a China-facing strike corps in the northeast, deployment of Brahmos missiles, establishment of new ALGs, and development of nuclear ballistic missiles such as the Agni-V. While each of these Indian programs are still works in progress, they are already prompting China to darken its views toward India.

Indian Self-Perceptions

It is critical to note that Indian civilian and military leaders see the purpose of its conventional advancements to be credibly deterring potential Chinese military actions, rather than attempting to permanently annex Chinese territory. The key to credible conventional deterrence, in the eyes of Indian strategic planners, is demonstrating the ability to take and hold limited tracts of Chinese land in areas where India enjoys a localized force superiority, as a form of bargaining leverage.³² With regard to nuclear deterrence, Indian strategists

are convinced that China will only view India as a serious nuclear actor, posing a credible deterrent threat, when New Delhi is able to hold major metropolitan targets on China's east coast at risk.

The overarching perception among Indian policymakers and strategic experts is that such an approach remains essentially defensive in nature.³³ One assumption (not publicly stated) that informs India's view that its posture is defensive is the (arguably incorrect) notion that India

must still play catch-up to China's formidable regional military capabilities. A second inbuilt Indian assumption is that, as the weaker power, it should be obvious that India has no interest in initiating a war. China, however, sees these military developments, and Indian views of their essentially defensive nature, very differently.

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Chinese Perceptions of Indian Military Developments

Chinese security planners have long viewed India as a secondary or even tertiary challenge compared to the United States, Russia, and Japan. Editions of the *Science of Military Strategy*, which represent the authoritative consensus of PLA strategists, along with other similar official defense studies, regularly reiterate this ranking by virtue of the level of comparative attention devoted to each state.³⁴ However, in recent years, Chinese officials and experts have begun to pay closer attention to India's improving military capabilities. While the most recent *Science of Military Strategy* iteration elevated India's position in its nuclear risk analysis, it appeared to recognize the limited offensive intentions of its conventional force modernizations. Nonetheless, this conclusion has not diffused into the wider Chinese security discourse on India.³⁵

Recent Chinese internal briefing documents and articles have begun to gloomily characterize the Sino-Indian relationship as a "security dilemma," noting that Beijing's previous attempts to expand economic cooperation with India as a means of disincentivizing military competition appear to failing.³⁶ Much of this analysis instead emphasizes the provocative, aggressive nature of recent Indian military advancements near the border areas. A 2013 article in the *China National Defense Daily* concluded that India was conducting a "surge of forces" toward the Chinese border, while a *Nanfang Daily* survey of Chinese strategic thinkers observed that "the defensive strategy of the Indian Army (has begun) to shift . . . toward an offensive [one]."³⁷ Meanwhile, authors from the PLA Nanjing Army Command College have framed India's nuclear missile program not as an effort to assure minimum credible deterrence, but as revealing New Delhi's nuclear intentions to "compete" with China.³⁸ Chinese experts have expressed open concern about the implications of India's positioning of Brahmos missiles close to Chinese border areas, with some suggesting that this forms part of India's nuclear strike capacity.³⁹

With regard to nuclear force developments, Chinese experts have observed India's continued progress on developing and fielding long-range and diversified delivery vehicles, such as the Agni-V missile and a nuclear-armed submarine fleet. Chinese analysts tend to view India's apparent aspiration to attain the capability to reach targets beyond Tibet and southwestern China as unnecessary for establishing a credible Indian nuclear deterrent against China; they instead cite this aspiration as evidence of India's desire to militarily compete with China as an end in itself and to build the portfolio of defense capabilities commensurate with great-power status. This reinforces the growing consensus among many in Beijing that its relationship with New Delhi in the years to come will be characterized more by military competition and tensions than peaceful cooperation and dispute resolution.⁴⁰

The Impact of Chinese Force Posturing

Like India's military developments, changes in China's military have shaped the security tensions between the two countries. Beijing's evolving attitudes toward New Delhi amount to the mirror-opposite of India's own views, characterized by the dual convictions of aggressive Indian intentions and an essentially defensive Chinese posture.

Chinese Conventional Military Developments

China is in the middle of one of the largest-scale military reorganizations in human history. The PLA was previously divided into seven military regions, with the northwestern Lanzhou and southwestern Chengdu regions nearest and most relevant to handling India-related contingencies. This was a less-than-ideal organizational structure for directing potential military operations against India; as a 2016 *PLA Daily* article observed, "both Lanzhou and Chengdu (military regions) face India and Pakistan. If a war broke out in that direction, the two (military regions) would have to implement wartime organizational adjustment."⁴¹ Under the military reforms announced and detailed in late 2015 and early 2016, the seven military regions are being reorganized into five joint service "theater commands."⁴² The aforementioned *PLA Daily* article noted that a new offensive philosophy would inform the formation and operations of these commands: "In terms of strategic planning, the five Theater Commands is [sic] no longer positioned for regional defense, but head-on and proactive defense . . . The new Theater Commands will attack proactively once a war broke out instead of passively waiting for defending the enemy at home."⁴³

One motivation for the Chinese military reforms was to limit the potential for internal miscommunication, and the corollary impacts on mobilization timelines (as illuminated in the *PLA Daily* article on the Lanzhou and

Chengdu military regions system), by reducing the number of military commands. In other parts of China, this goal is being enacted; the new theater commands have operational control over army, air force, and navy forces in their designated region, with the exception of a separate, specially created military district (MD) for Beijing. This MD reports directly to the central army headquarters in Beijing, despite its position within the geographical

area of Central Theater Command operational control. In China's western regions, however, the objective of downscaling the number of commands has conflicted with the army's preference to retain significant operational authority over the politically restive regions of Tibet and Xinjiang.

For western China, then, the result of the reforms is that India must now contend with having three, rather than two, Chinese commands positioned

China is in the middle of one of the largest-scale military reorganizations in human history.

against it. The units of the previous Lanzhou and Chengdu military regions are now ostensibly largely under the direction of a new single Western Theater Command facing India. The theater command retains control of the Seventy-Sixth (formerly Twenty-First) and Seventy-Seventh (formerly Thirteenth) Group Armies, numbering between 45,000 and 60,000 personnel each, and which are headquartered deeper in China's interior, in Chongqing and Baoji, respectively. The Western Theater Command also has assumed control of the air force units of the old military regions. However, primarily due to the ongoing domestic political unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang, the army is in sole control of ground forces and border defense units in two specially created MDs for these provinces. These MDs report to the central army headquarters in Beijing, rather than the Western Theater Command.⁴⁴

This new tripartite structure has exacerbated existing problems for Indian strategic planners, in terms of determining the specific Chinese military body and its tier of internal command that authorizes any significant border incursions or troop movements. A leading U.S. expert on the Chinese army concludes that a system has likely been adopted in which these MDs “keep the . . . Western TC Army headquarters informed of the situations in their areas of responsibility as they report to Army headquarters.”⁴⁵ However, the opportunities for internal Chinese miscommunication and misunderstanding of who ordered a potential operation against India, as well as discerning the nature of Indian responses, is readily apparent from this description. This potential for confusion is further amplified by the sheer depth of the ongoing Chinese defense reforms, in which “military units are still getting to know their officers. Every unit is different; nearly all have been changed.”⁴⁶ This situation elevates the risk of both Indian and Chinese misperceptions of the intentions of a Chinese military operation.

As of January 2018, the overall division of Chinese army ground force personnel in the region is estimated to be around 40,000 for the Tibet MD, 70,000 for the Xinjiang MD, and 90,000–120,000 for the Western Theater Command.⁴⁷ The relatively small proportion of forces permanently committed to the Tibet MD, the only PLA ground forces positioned near the border with India, stands in contrast to the figure of around 221,000 Indian Army troops who are all positioned close to Chinese territory. However, much has been made of China's superior military logistical network, which would allow tens of thousands of troops to be brought to the theater in a matter of days; moreover, the patchy nature of India's intelligence and surveillance network might allow such movements to go unnoticed.⁴⁸ A July 2017 report published by the *Diplomat*, citing Indian defense sources, calculates that this Chinese network could enable “up to seven division-sized formations,” (constituting around 91,000 troops) to be mobilized to Tibet in seven days, with an additional quantity of around 150,000 troops transportable within up to four

weeks.⁴⁹ The limited progress of India's own road construction program along the border indicates that there is still a substantial way to go before the Indian logistical network can attain a similar level of sophistication to that of China.

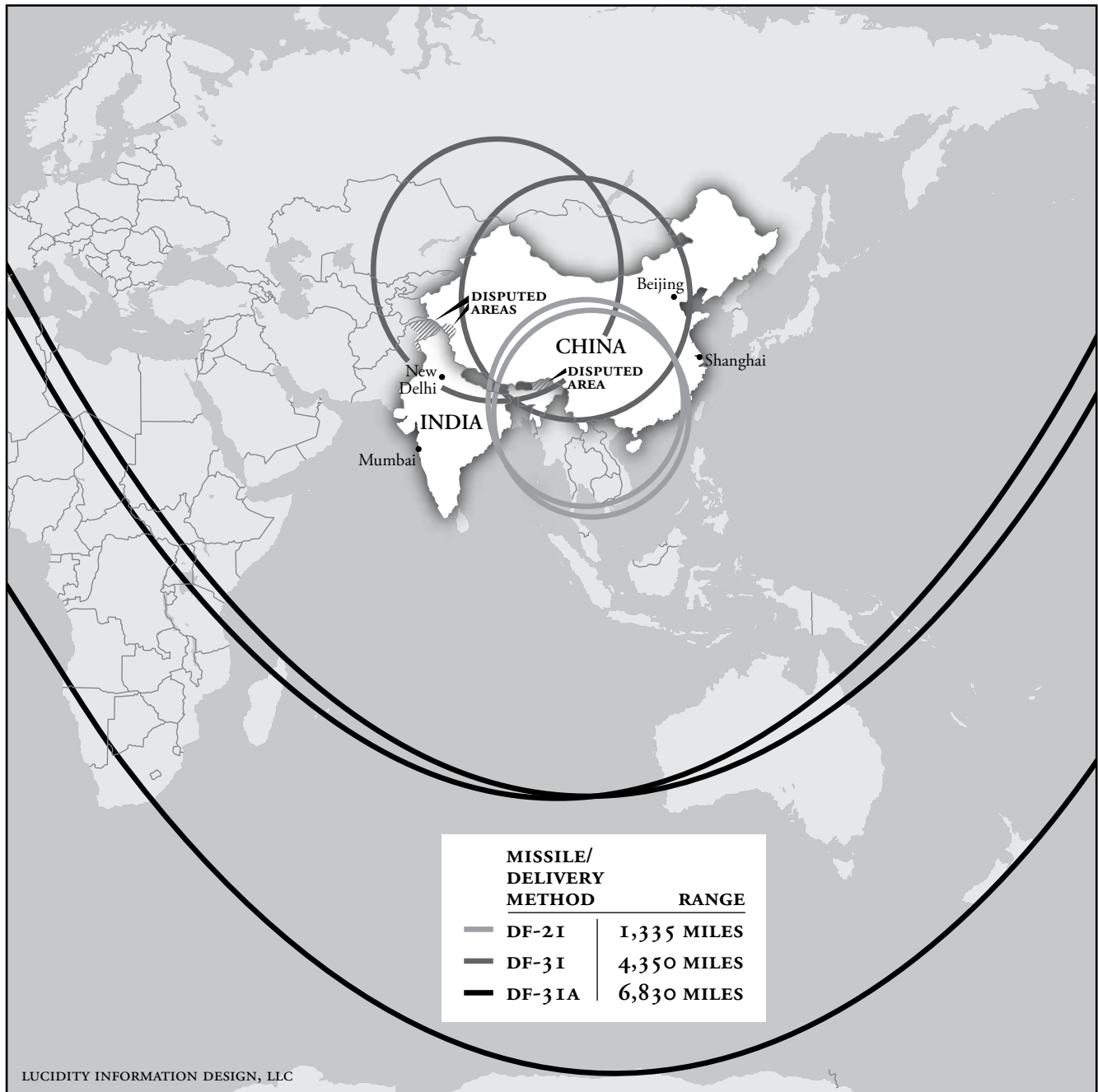
In 2018, India therefore faces a more complex Chinese military operational apparatus, even within the Western Theater Command, that is still being constructed. This makes it more difficult for Indian strategic planners to identify the intentions, and command authority, behind specific Chinese military actions near the border area. These issues are magnified by Beijing's instructions that the new theater commands will be more "proactive" than defensive in their organizational posture and warfighting philosophy.⁵⁰ Combined with the aggressive diplomatic statements China issued during the Doklam crisis, Beijing seems to be adopting a more hostile and militarily assertive stance toward India. China's rapid military mobilization capabilities further elevate threat perceptions in India.

Admittedly, India still retains some key significant advantages. New Delhi boasts a greater force presence positioned permanently closer to the border area than China does. Moreover, given that the United States already shares intelligence on Chinese submarine movements with India, it is unlikely that Washington would allow New Delhi to be entirely in the dark regarding a huge mobilization by their mutual adversary; such U.S. intelligence sharing in the case of major Chinese land-based mobilizations near the border would give India time to countermobilize and severely diminish the chances of a successful major Chinese surprise attack.⁵¹ Yet these multiple threatening Chinese developments are nevertheless driving Indian efforts to strengthen its conventional force posture along the border areas. In turn, these Indian efforts then validate the growing beliefs in Beijing that India is more interested in militarily competing with China than pursuing avenues of cooperation, such as expanding economic trade. This intensifying security dilemma reduces bilateral diplomatic and military room for managing tensions.

Chinese Nuclear Developments

China's nuclear force capabilities, in range and volume, are on a significantly greater scale than those of India. As figure 2 indicates, China's India-facing nuclear forces have the capability to reach any potential targets within Indian territory.⁵² Within the PLA Rocket Force bases nearest to India (Bases 53 and 56), the author estimates that China has fielded over 100 nuclear or nuclear-capable missiles that, collectively, can hold any part of Indian territory at risk.⁵³ This calculation excludes nuclear forces held at the other four Rocket Force bases, which can additionally target India if necessary. China reportedly has assigned conventional DF-21C ballistic missiles to the Da Qaidam, Delingha, and Korla brigades of Base 56. It is furthermore probable that all three India-facing military commands possess 180-kilometer-range conventional WS-1B multiple rocket launch systems (MRLS), and the Tibet and Xinjiang MDs also

Figure 2. Select Chinese India-Facing Nuclear Forces



Sources: Online resources from various think tank researchers, private companies, and intelligence documents. See endnote 50 for more details.

Note: This map provides an indicative selection of Chinese missiles able to reach India, but should not be read as a complete inventory of Chinese India-facing nuclear forces.

China's nuclear force capabilities, in range and volume, are on a significantly greater scale than those of India.

likely hold 150-kilometer-range conventional PHL-03 MRLS.⁵⁴ It is worth noting that an array of external analysts, Chinese defense sources, and serving and retired Indian military officials all anticipate that China would employ conventional missile strikes in an open conflict with India.⁵⁵

As Indian defense experts note, “The PLA’s large number of ballistic and cruise missiles cannot be matched by India, and are the biggest worry for the IAF [Indian Air Force].”⁵⁶ To counteract this Chinese missile advantage, Indian strategic planners are constructing hardened shelters for aircraft hosted at air bases and ALGs located near border areas and are training base staff to quickly repair

damage to runways following an adversary missile attack. They are also placing special focus on the new Brahmos missile deployments to retaliate against local Chinese force concentrations and bases, in case an extensive Chinese missile strike significantly erodes India’s air force abilities in this respect.⁵⁷

At the same time, China’s nuclear and missile superiority still help fuel Indian demand for more ALGs, Brahmos missiles, and longer-range nuclear missiles (such as the Agni-V) to correct what is perceived to be India’s inadequate deterrent vis-à-vis China.⁵⁸ These Indian developments, again, strengthen Chinese perceptions that India is adopting a more militarily aggressive posture against China, that Chinese peaceful diplomatic and economic initiatives are falling upon increasingly deaf ears in New Delhi, and that a more assertive Chinese defense policy toward India will be required in this new bilateral context.⁵⁹

Chinese Self-Perceptions

India continues to strengthen its general force presence and readiness near Chinese border areas, and this increases the perceived pressure for Beijing to follow suit. A 2014 Chinese Academy of Social Sciences briefing prepared for policymakers and analysts noted that “Chinese media is [shifting] its focus from civilian life in India to military confrontation.”⁶⁰ Two scholarly experts on Chinese territorial issues concluded:

. . . being weak to the enemy will only make India more arrogant and tougher in border negotiations . . . Therefore, keeping our military’s advantage in the Sino-Indian border area is not only due to the need of national defense, but also to prevent China from being disadvantaged in the negotiations and to increase [our] bargaining power for the border negotiations.⁶¹

However, while there is evidence that China is augmenting its presence in the Doklam area and at two nearby airbases, there is little sign at present of the kind of major redirection or creation of new Chinese forces facing India that would signify that Beijing is planning for a substantive conflict.⁶² This indicates that, for now, China’s leaders are confident in the robustness of their military posture against India. Indeed, as an Indian Eastern Air Command official has remarked,

Considering that India is seen as a major emerging power in Asia, a push of ten days to India by China would settle matters and announce China as the sole power in Asia. The Chinese have already created good infrastructure to support military operations (in the Tibet Autonomous Region). What stops them from showcasing their technology at a time of their choosing?⁶³

Indian Perceptions of Chinese Military Developments

In contrast to their perceptions of India's essentially defensive posture, Indian decisionmakers exhibit deep concern about Chinese strategic intentions. During the Doklam episode, members of the Indian Army Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) office were quietly dispatched to the Central Sector to assess force readiness there, even though such an area was never contested in the 1962 war. This suggests that India was anticipating the prospect of Chinese incursions in this sector.⁶⁴ In addition, the CCS requested an inventory of available submarines to heighten readiness for the vessels to be flushed—sent out to sea en masse—both to defend against a potential Chinese naval attack, and to prevent the submarines from being destroyed in port. The briefing they received of submarine readiness specifically included the Arihant-class nuclear-armed submarine, which they found out was in dock for repairs and immobile at the time. This makes it highly likely that the boat would have been fielded, if operational, to protect it along with the other submarines. This outcome could have sent potential nuclear signals to Beijing, by visibly placing a nuclear delivery vehicle at heightened operational readiness as the crisis progressed.⁶⁵

There have been other signs, too, that some Indian strategists harbor strategic misgivings about China that could manifest in a tougher Indian defense posture. One retired chief of the China-facing Army Northern and Central Commands stated that he expected the Doklam standoff, if it had extended into winter, to eventuate in overwhelming Chinese missile strikes on Indian forces to clear the area.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, there is a persistent belief in Indian strategic circles that China has positioned tactical nuclear weapons in Tibet against India or is planning to do so, leading some analysts to recommend that India follow suit.⁶⁷

Policy Recommendations

At this critical juncture in the deteriorating relationship between Asia's nuclear giants, there are at least three policy prescriptions that could help stabilize the situation.

Expanding Military-to-Military Communication

Sino-Indian military-to-military contact primarily occurs at the tactical level, through flag meetings between forces patrolling disputed border areas. India

has proposed establishing a hotline between the DGMO at Indian Army headquarters and PLA army headquarters to allow the two sides to immediately clarify any relevant issues at a more senior directive level.

However, discussions on this proposal have not progressed.⁶⁸ A likely barrier to this change will be the sensitivity of the Chinese civilian leadership regarding the prospect of the PLA directly negotiating on security issues with India without obtaining clear civilian instruction from the Central Military Commission (CMC) first. The CMC, chaired by Chinese President Xi Jinping, is China's most senior defense decisionmaking body, with responsibility for "formulation of military strategy, handling contingencies, building effective military forces, coordination of military, economic, political, and diplomatic strategies, and formulating military guidelines and policies."⁶⁹ This being the case, the PLA Headquarters receives strategic instructions from the civilian-led CMC. Indeed, one long-time analyst of the Chinese military has remarked that "he had never seen a case where civilian leaders told the PLA to do something and the PLA did not do it or where civilian party leaders told the PLA not to do something and the PLA did it anyway."⁷⁰

Notably, the PLA has significant intelligence responsibilities, especially with regard to India, where it must compensate for China's reportedly weak human intelligence network.⁷¹ But if China and India were to create new channels between the DMGO and the PLA leadership for obtaining an understanding of adversary perceptions and activities, China could structure such a mechanism so that final political-military decisions remain reserved for the civilian leaders of the CMS. Enhancing such military-to-military communications therefore would not necessarily be inconsistent with China's prevailing civil-military traditions.

China and India also should aim to put in place similar procedures at the theater level, given the increased operational responsibility being accorded to new regional military structures under the ongoing Chinese military reforms. While the new Western Theater Command unites regional Chinese army, air force, and logistical (Strategic Support Force) units under a single operational command, this new structure is complicated by the creation of the separate Tibet and Xinjiang MDs under direct army operational control in Beijing.⁷² In light of this complicated command structure, China should establish a single military liaison point across these structures, with responsibility for communicating with senior Indian theater commanders. Similarly, India could create a single liaison point with joint communicative responsibility for the separate Northern, Central, and Eastern Commands facing China. This hub could either be established and operated by these three commands, or at the DGMO level.

Improved military-to-military links between China and India would help address a principal source of bilateral strategic tensions. As highlighted by a researcher at the PLA Academy of Military Sciences: "There is a relatively good

relationship between high-level exchanges and political relations. However, there is a lack of mutual understanding among the civilians and a lack of mutual trust in the militar(ies).⁷³ The contradiction between the first and second sentences in this statement reveal the distinction between the performative declarations of partnership that accompany summits of political leaders and the real mutual suspicion that propels day-to-day security policymaking in both capitals.

This proposal would help address this mutual suspicion by creating communications bridges at new operational tiers in Indian and Chinese defense policymaking structures. Such proposals to bolster communications ties are especially important given the significant role of both armed forces in interpreting the meaning of opposite military movements and reporting this framing, and a potential menu of proposed military responses, to policymakers. The Doklam crisis was partly initiated by an assessment of local Indian military units that China's annual road construction efforts in the area would be far more ambitious in 2017, based on their reading of the volume of relevant equipment and materials that Chinese forces were carrying.⁷⁴ Similarly, recent accounts of Chinese defense policymaking indicate that the PLA has a primary, if not leading, role in framing strategic developments for civilian leaders and proposing responses. Given that the particular weaknesses of Chinese intelligence gathering with respect to India could render the PLA an especially authoritative intelligence source regarding New Delhi's military intentions, this dynamic could be further amplified.⁷⁵

There has been a recent revival of interest in both New Delhi and Beijing about constructing this type of arrangement, as a result of meetings between Modi and Xi from April 27–28, 2018. There is an agreement in principle that a hotline could be established between the Indian Army DGMO and PLA army headquarters in Beijing. While this proposal would institute national military-to-military ties, it presently omits additional theater military linkages. In addition, the enacting of this agreement is stalled as of May 2018. This is due to Beijing's insistence that DGMO requests to contact the PLA Headquarters must be submitted to the Chinese embassy in New Delhi, with at least forty-eight hours' notice before the hotline conversation can take place.⁷⁶

This format would undermine the purpose of this policy recommendation in two ways. First, creating military-to-military communications ties at only the national and not the theater level would reduce the positive effects that this measure would have toward building mutual defense transparency and understanding. Second, the idea of routing an Indian hotline request through the Chinese embassy, with an expected communications delay of at least forty-eight hours, is most likely designed to enable the CMC to devise and issue detailed, rigid communication instructions to the PLA Headquarters.

To maintain coherence of official communications, it is highly unlikely that these CMC instructions would deviate from Ministry of Defense and

Ministry of Foreign Affairs language on the issue of Indian concern, or that such instructions would empower the PLA interlocutor to depart in any way from this official line as a hypothetical DGMO conversation with Indian interlocutors evolved. This approach would align with the training and career advancement model for Chinese diplomats, which tends to prioritize qualities like loyalty and discipline over creativity and strategic thinking.⁷⁷ However, for the national and theater hotlines to have their intended effects, designated Chinese military interlocutors must be granted the authority to discuss de-escalation measures with their Indian counterparts.

A far more effective version of this hotline proposal would therefore also incorporate the direct theater military-to-military communications line. This hotline could be utilized without notice in the early stages of a standoff or crisis to improve both militaries' understandings of the other's perceptual and geographical positions, correct relevant misperceptions, and help avoid escalatory civilian-ordered actions that are premised on military misinterpretations of an adversary's intentions. Beijing suggested a variant of this proposal in late May 2018, which would entail connecting the central Indian Army DGMO to the Tibet MD. However, this mismatch of comparative military tiers is being read in India as a deliberate Chinese effort to imply that the panoply of Indian border concerns and related communications do not merit the attention of the more senior Western Theater Command; consequently, one Indian observer noted that "it seems the Chinese want to dismiss the issues with India and India as a regional problem and power respectively."⁷⁸ Implementing the model of twin hotlines, with a regional hotline format that would address India's objections, is the optimal solution. The proposed regional hotline would encompass, on the Chinese side, the Western Theater Command and Tibet and Xinjiang MD forces, and on the Indian side, a dedicated unit spanning the Central, Eastern, and Northern Indian Army commands, or a DGMO unit charged with the same responsibility, depending on India's preference.

Establishing a Comprehensive Strategic and Nuclear Dialogue

Establishing a strategic dialogue between China and India to reduce mutual threat perceptions and clarify misunderstandings would complement and overlay the communications-enhancing initiatives outlined above. For example, Indian officials could arrange to brief their Chinese counterparts on the solely conventional capability and defensive intentions of India's Brahmos units, similar to how Washington encouraged Chinese officials to be briefed on regional Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense missile defense deployments to demonstrate that these deployments were not directed at China.⁷⁹ Similarly, Beijing could prove to New Delhi, by sharing relevant information, that there are no tactical nuclear weapons in Tibet and that China has no intention to introduce such weapons there.

A China-India strategic and nuclear dialogue could discuss the countries' nuclear and conventional doctrinal policies, talk about their force posturing intentions, and explore possible procedures for prenotification of missile tests and major military exercises. The principal impediment to initiating these forms of interactions has been Beijing's ongoing resistance to recognizing India as a legitimate nuclear-weapon state (as it is outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty), ostensibly prohibiting military nuclear dialogue. However, given that PLA assessments suggest that India's emerging nuclear force—itsself motivated by negative Indian assessments of Chinese strategic intentions—threaten to more directly affect China's nuclear survivability and associated force modeling in the future, such a diplomatic stance should be adjusted.⁸⁰ Such a step would further ameliorate the Sino-Indian security dilemma. While Beijing has shown few signs thus far of reconsidering this position toward India in its nuclear diplomacy, it would be in Beijing's own defense interests to do so, given that India's growing military capabilities are raising the relative costs of Beijing's ongoing refusal to recognize India as a nuclear-weapons state.

Unilateral Chinese Ceasing of Provocative Border Activities

Chinese analysts frequently criticize Indian policymakers for adhering to a false China threat theory that obscures Beijing's true desire for a cooperative partnership with a rising India.⁸¹ This theory, these experts maintain, is partly generated and inflamed by irresponsible Indian media coverage. However, these Chinese strategists either dismiss, or significantly downplay, the significance of far-reaching Chinese border incursions in validating and inflaming these perceptions.⁸² These incursions frequently coincide with official dialogues, undercutting the message of peaceful cooperation and diplomatic resolution of political and strategic differences that Beijing's diplomats wish to convey. Instances in which Chinese forces have established an advance position and refused to move, such as the Depsang Chang incident of 2013 that occurred “19 [kilometers] inside what India considered its side of the LAC [Line of Actual Control],” should therefore not be repeated.⁸³

This is a difficult option for Chinese policymakers to consider, given their existing claimed territorial rights in the region and their need to “strike a balance between rights protection and stability maintenance,” as expressed in the country's 2015 defense white paper.⁸⁴ However, it should be noted that these activities are a primary driver of ongoing hostile Indian views of China, which in turn propel India's growing defense collaboration with the United States and Japan. As the militarily stronger state in the bilateral China-India rivalry, and one that has been able to cede substantial swathes of territory when resolving border disputes with other neighbors, China can afford to make this operational concession to reduce the Sino-Indian security dilemma. If China were to do so, the absence of Indian initiatives to seize such an opportunity to attempt

to acquire valuable tracts of territory in the border areas would illuminate to Beijing the limited, defensive intentions of India's force modernization.

Conclusion

The risk of open military conflict between China and India is growing. The potential introduction of a nuclear dimension to the Doklam episode, by way of Indian policymakers' discussion of the availability of the Arihant nuclear-armed submarine, emphasizes the urgent stakes associated with the task of managing tensions responsibly. Any military conflict between the top two rising powers of Asia would be catastrophic not just for their mutual interest in generating domestic economic prosperity but also for global security. Beijing and New Delhi should initiate confidence-building and transparency measures to prevent the further deterioration of their strategic relationship and correct current and future misperceptions about their respective strategic intentions.

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