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A Historical Evaluation of China's India Policy: Lessons for India-China Relations

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Summary

The violent clash in the Galwan valley in eastern Ladakh in 2020 fundamentally altered the dynamics of the India-China relationship. China's increasing transgressions and attempts at coercion in the border areas since 2008–2009 have put the boundary question to the center of the India-China relationship. The salience of this question has also increased because the geopolitical backlash to China's actions in 2020 has been greater than in previous instances, and because India's policymakers and strategic community are no longer willing to give Beijing the benefit of the doubt regarding its intentions and actions. This has prompted a comprehensive relook in India at the past, present, and future of the relationship. While much of this has focused on the relationship from the Indian perspective and on trying to understand India's China policy, the current chill in ties has highlighted the necessity of understanding China's India policy. Thus, using Chinese sources, this paper analyzes the drivers of that policy and the options available to Indian policymakers to engage with, adapt to, and mold it.

This paper argues that from the time of Mao Zedong's rise to the helm of the Chinese Communist Party and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China's India policy has been shaped by its view of the larger great power strategic triangle of China, the Soviet Union (later Russia), and the United States. As this triangle has evolved, this has had a direct effect on the India-China relationship. For much of the past seventy years, China was the weakest corner of the triangle and therefore driven by goals of security and status. In that context, it saw India—another large, developing country in Asia—as a competitor for security and status alike. As a result, China always looked at India through the lens of its own relations with the Soviet Union and the United States. It did not view India

on its own merits, or credit it with agency, but as unequal as well as untrustworthy. China's objective during the Cold War was to keep India as neutral as possible. In the post-Cold War period, the goal evolved to limit through containment and coercion India's capacity to harm China's strategic goal of hegemony.

This paper analyzes China's India policy in three phases. In the first phase between 1949 and 1962, China viewed the United States as its primary adversary and its core objective was to keep India neutral and away from the U.S. camp on matters of concern to Beijing. Flowing from this was the secondary objective of utilizing India's influence in the developing world to build "Asian solidarity" to stem U.S. inroads into Asia.

In the second phase between 1962 and 1989, the Sino-Soviet split and India's deepening ties with the Soviet Union led to China becoming increasingly concerned about its security. Thus, its policy remained to detach India from a great power that this time was the Soviet Union. Its policy was also to engage Pakistan in order to keep India in check.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War, the third phase began—one dominated by Chinese concerns that the United States wanted regime change in other communist states, including China. China also wished to secure its periphery. Thus, its policy was once again to reduce risk to its security by keeping India nonaligned and to reduce India's threat to its periphery. By the mid-2000s, the normalization of U.S.-China relations and its partnership with Russia meant a favorable balance of power for China, and as a result, the India-China relationship began to experience friction.

After Xi Jinping became president in 2013, with Beijing's increasing global assertiveness, the U.S.-China relationship has deteriorated, and the India-China relationship has experienced a fair amount of friction as a result. Beijing's India policy has been to resort again to low-level coercion on the border to establish deterrence. The final section of the paper explores whether this Chinese strategy will work in the changed geopolitical circumstances.

The paper argues that the developments along the Line of Actual Control between the two countries in 2020 have brought strategic clarity in India, and that China might need to revisit its assumption that an Indian response to its military coercion will remain indefinitely low. The paper also discusses options for India to try to mold China's policy. It suggests that India should be more transparent and credible in its political signaling, that it needs to pursue risk management at a higher politico-strategic level to prevent an escalation of tension, and that it must find common ground for a discussion of respective interests and concerns in the context of the Indo-Pacific region, which is becoming crucial to both countries.

Introduction

The year 2020 was significant for India-China relations because the violent clash in the Galwan valley in eastern Ladakh fundamentally altered their dynamics. China's escalating coercive behavior in the border areas since 2008–2009 has returned the boundary question to the forefront of relations. Its actions resemble gray-zone coercion with tactics using smaller capabilities than those available to the military but that can still be quite damaging for India.¹ China has used such tactics previously, but this time the geopolitical backlash has been greater than it might have anticipated because India has decided to balance against China in military posture and via alignments. More importantly, the strategic and intellectual debate in India has shifted from giving China the benefit of the doubt with regard to its intentions and prompted a full-scale review of the relationship.

Most studies of India-China relations have been undertaken from the Indian perspective. The primary purpose of this paper is to analyze China's India policy—its drivers from 1949 until the present and its implications for future relations. Undertaking such an analysis is challenging because of the paucity of Chinese sources. China is a closed society where firsthand information from policymakers is carefully controlled, and only sanitized versions are released from time to time. The risk in interpreting such sources is great because of the difficulties in corroborating them from other sources such as the media or public discourse. Any analysis might therefore be partial, but even this can be useful to policymakers and researchers who are working on the bilateral relationship between the two major Asian countries.

Methodology

This paper uses three kinds of primary sources. The first is speeches by Chinese leaders that have been officially published. These are usually excerpts or summaries, but they give direct insight into the thinking of China's top leadership, and they are also a means of messaging to the Chinese people. The second kind of primary written material consists of memoirs of Chinese diplomats, especially state councilors and foreign ministers. It is presumed that such writings have been carefully vetted prior to publication, but they nonetheless give information about the making of policy by key officers of China's foreign policy establishment. The third kind of primary material consists of scholarly writings published by Chinese think tanks.

This paper does not focus on individual events or issues in India-China relations. The objective is to analyze what the structural drivers of China's India policy have been and what is their relevance in the present context. The first three sections contain an analysis of the factors that have shaped China's India policy in the pre-1962 period, in the period between 1962 and the end of the Cold War, and in the post-Cold War period. The final section explores the policy implications in the post-Galwan context and what India could do to steer China's policy onto a mutually satisfactory path.

This paper seeks to demonstrate that the India policy of the People's Republic of China, since its founding in 1949, has been shaped within the larger framework of the great power strategic triangle of China, the Soviet Union (later Russia), and the United States. China was for much of the past seventy years the weakest point in this triangle and, therefore, driven by security concerns and status scarcity. It saw India in the context of this strategic triangle as a security problem as well as a rival for status, and not bilaterally as an actor in its own right but rather as an adjunct to other great powers. Hence, the relationship was not one of equals from Beijing's perspective. China's objective was to keep India, which it did not trust, as neutral as possible during the Cold War while it struggled to rise, and then in the post-Cold War period to limit through containment and coercion India's capacity to harm China's strategic goal of hegemony.

China also appears to think that India's political system and the asymmetry of economic power between the two countries do not require it to reshape its India policy in a way that meaningfully accommodates Indian interests. Hence, its actions appear intended to press India to address Chinese strategic concerns while asking India to treat its own concerns as localized problems that should be managed and not raised in ways that disturb the relationship. Since China's leaders deal with India more tactically than strategically, they have used coercive tactics from time to time to make their case. They seem to have concluded that India has little appetite, capability, or leverage to retaliate and impose costs on China.

This paper argues that the situation may have changed after 2020 for a variety of reasons, which include India's reassessment of China and its greater political will as well as better military preparedness to respond to Chinese coercion. China might consequently make

a strategic miscalculation by overestimating the power asymmetry and underestimating India's capabilities for a geopolitical counter-response. An escalation of tension and absence of dialogue will make risk-management more difficult and China, as the larger power with global ambitions, may stand to lose more. The paper's conclusion is that China should adjust its policy toward India by looking at the country as a major Indo-Pacific actor with which it needs to develop a *modus vivendi* in the bilateral and regional context. Whether and how India can change China's strategic perception, and whether China will recalibrate its India policy in a rapidly changing global and regional post-pandemic world, will determine whether the two countries will manage their competition prudently or be trapped in a conflict.²

China's India Policy, 1949–1965

In order to have a good understanding of the early dynamics of the relationship between the People's Republic of China's and India after 1949, it is important to situate it within the broader context of the evolution of Chinese foreign policy prior to the establishment of the new Chinese state. Mao Zedong was greatly interested in world affairs. In October 1938, he foretold the “massive war that threatens mankind.”³ His primary interest was in exploring how China might benefit from the war and, more specifically, what advantage the Chinese communists might gain from the intensifying differences between Japan and the United States on the one hand, and from the possibility of better relations between the Soviet Union and the United States on the other. After Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, Mao talked of a global anti-fascist front with China as a leader alongside Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States. The emphasis on China as a front-rank global power despite its relative weakness was a regular theme in his writings.⁴ After the tide turned in favor of the allied powers, Mao talked about a postwar order that would be shaped collectively by these four countries,⁵ and claimed that China would also play “a very great role in safeguarding peace in the postwar world and a decisive one in safeguarding peace in the east.”⁶ By China he meant the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). From Mao's speeches, it was clear that the CCP saw China's postwar role as that of the front-rank world power that would play the central role in safeguarding peace in Asia.

The other major foreign policy preoccupation of the CCP prior to 1949 was the attitude of and relationship with the United States. It initially believed that Washington was not averse to accommodation, but disillusionment had set in by the end of 1946. Zhou Enlai complained that the American envoys were deceitful.⁷ Mao and Zhou labeled the Americans as imperialists and talked about an anti-imperialist front headed by the Soviet Union.⁸ In 1949, Zhou demanded that the United States withdraw all its military forces from China, saying: “We have the right to wipe them out.”⁹ From that point on, the United States was seen as the existential threat. Mao announced his decision to “lean” to the side of the Soviet Union and to form a united front against U.S. imperialism.¹⁰

Thus, when the People's Republic of China was established in October 1949, two central narratives formed in the CCP: that China was the dominant Asian power without an equal in the region and that the United States was the primary adversary. Since the party and the state were fused indistinguishably, these two narratives were hardwired into the machinery of the new regime.

Where did India fit into this Chinese worldview? Jawaharlal Nehru, who would eventually be India's prime minister, and Mao corresponded with each other in the 1930s.¹¹ In August 1939, Nehru visited China and met Mao's colleagues in Chongqing. By early 1942, then president Chiang Kai-shek was expressing support for India's independence.¹² Given Mao's interest in world affairs, he would have known about India's anti-imperialist struggle against the British, but neither Mao nor Zhou referred to this in their writings before 1945, even as many Asian and African colonies were following India's lead, not China's. They made only general references to the freedom struggle in the colonies.¹³ From an interview that Mao gave to the American journalist Edgar Snow in 1936, it seems that he was not willing to acknowledge India's leadership in the fight to liberate Asia from colonial rule. Mao told Snow that, "when the Chinese revolution comes to full power, the masses of many colonial countries will follow the example of China."¹⁴ The Chinese revolution was deemed to be the "most important event" in postwar "Afro-Asia."¹⁵ The strategic thinking of the CCP leaders was dominated by the idea of China as the center of the communist movement and the Third World.

In 1954, Mao divided the beneficiaries of the Second World War into three categories: the United States, countries like China that were led by communist or socialist parties, and the "oppressed nations" like India that were not led by communist parties but by "patriotic organizations."¹⁶ This suggests that India belonged in a lesser category for the CCP, presumably because its revolution was incomplete. Although the Indian National Congress was the dominant anti-imperial force, in 1943, Mao had made a specific reference to the Communist Party of India as "joining us in opposing Japanese imperialism."¹⁷ Mao was hoping that India's freedom might usher in a like-minded socialist government.

Aside from the fact that the CCP did not consider India's role in Asia as being as important as its own and did not look upon it as an equal, declassified papers also reveal that there was deep distrust of the country within the highest levels of the Chinese party-state from the beginning. Mao had a negative view of Nehru. On November 19, 1949, he wrote to Bhalchandra Trimbak Ranadive, the general secretary of the Communist Party of India, calling Nehru a "collaborator" (*he zuo zhe*) of imperialism.¹⁸ His view of India as being on the other side of the postwar political divide may have deepened because of India's neutral position vis-à-vis the two major blocs. Nehru wished to follow an independent foreign policy. But, even though Nehru said that "we do not propose to line up with any activity that may appear to be against China,"¹⁹ for Mao everybody had to "lean either to the side of imperialism or to the side of socialism. Sitting on the fence will not do, nor is there a third road."²⁰ In Chinese eyes, India was not part of the socialist bloc and was therefore part of

the imperialist bloc. The CCP labeled Nehru a “thoroughly loyal servant of US imperialism” and the “American running dog” seeking a leadership role in Asia from his U.S. “masters.”²¹ China’s new leaders plotted with the Soviets for a communist takeover in India. In December 1950, Chinese leaders Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai were urging the Soviet Union to strengthen the Communist Party of India “in connection with the role that India should play in the final destruction of international imperialism.”²²

One could conclude that for China there was no mind-space for India as an independent player in postwar international relations since it was neither China’s equal nor ideologically aligned. India was tagged as a part of the imperialist-capitalist camp led by the United States. By implication, that meant India had no agency of its own, did not act independently, and could not be trusted. This did not mean the CCP had no use for India in the early years. It had decided to combat the U.S. challenge by adopting “united front” tactics.²³ The strategy, according to Zhou, was “to consolidate and develop the strength of the international forces for peace [meaning the socialist countries] and to extend the influence of New China [by uniting] with and win[ning] over the former colonial and semi-colonial states.” He was even more specific about the countries of Southeast Asia: “We should try to win them over,” he said, “so that they will remain neutral in time of war and keep their distance from the imperialists in times of peace.”²⁴ In other words, the strategy was to deny the United States further space among the newly independent countries in the region surrounding China by building “Asian solidarity.” This involved persuading Asian governments that it was in their best interest to remain neutral and to help China to build a postwar Asia for Asians. India was a principal target of persuasion in the implementation of this policy.

Thus, the core of China’s India policy consisted of two main strands. First, India must be deterred from becoming an US camp follower, and policy should be crafted to keep it neutral on important matters of concern to China. Second, India’s standing and influence in the developing world should be utilized to build “Asian solidarity” as a bulwark to stop further U.S. inroads into Asia.

Keeping India away from the United States became a key objective of China’s policy.²⁵ Persuasion and pressure were used for this purpose. In August 1949, a senior Chinese diplomat, Han Nianlong, told India’s ambassador to the Nationalist government, K. M. Panikkar, that “the only thing that could prevent the development of such [India-China] relations is if India permitted herself to be used as a base for American activities.”²⁶ In 1952, Zhou accused the United States of “trying to disrupt this [India-China] friendship.”²⁷ In 1954, Mao claimed that the United States was “bent on harming us whenever it has the opportunity,” and hinted that this would not be good for India either.²⁸ The CCP mounted pressure on India’s leaders by talking about a U.S. “conspiracy against the freedom of Asia,”²⁹ or by claiming, as Mao did in 1954, that “we, people of the east” have to cope with imperialism and protect each other.³⁰ In order to keep India away from the United States, China always framed issues in the context of imperialist versus newly independent states, and also in terms of Asian peoples determining their own destiny. In other words, framing that India

could relate to.³¹ By the mid-1950s, Nehru was telling his ambassador to Beijing that India was closer to China than to the United States.³² India began to undertake domestic and international advocacy on behalf of the CCP. In October 1954, Nehru claimed that there was “no doubt at all that the government and people of China desire peace.”³³ India even made a case for China at the 1956 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting by claiming that “it seemed unlikely that they would harbor aggressive intentions against any other country,” describing the main problem at hand as U.S. hostility to China.³⁴

The second objective of China’s India policy was to create a belt of neutral Asian nations in the proximate and peripheral regions around itself so that the United States would not be able to contain it. Once again, China resorted to “united front” tactics. In 1950, Zhou told a senior Indian diplomat, T. N. Kaul, that “all the Asian countries must be united on the basis of friendship, peace and mutual respect in order to oppose any imperialist aggression.”³⁵ In 1954, he flew down to India with the express purpose of “conducting preparation work for signing some form of Asian peace treaty and to strike a blow at the US conspiracy to organize a south east Asian invasive bloc (SEATO).”³⁶ The CCP saw the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung as a good platform to build an anti-U.S. front in the name of Asian solidarity.³⁷ It categorized countries as ranging from “peace and neutral” to “anti-peace and anti-neutral,” with specific instructions on how to approach the different categories under the “general line of expanding the united front of peace.”³⁸ India was a key instrument for executing this strategy. The CCP worked through Asian leaders to secure outcomes that served the objective of building an Asian front against the United States.³⁹ A subordinate goal of China’s policy at this time, particularly around the Bandung Conference, might also have been to use India to develop agency for China by building a Third World constituency independent of the Soviet Union.

The Bandung Conference marked the high point of China’s early India policy. Since China had crafted relations with India within the matrix of great power relations and with the primary objective of keeping it neutral, the policy worked so long as India shared the Chinese perspective on great power relations, addressed China’s core concerns in this larger context, and did not press its own issues. China seemed to expect that India would share its big-picture approach and treat its own concerns as local issues to be discussed but not allowed to upset the overall framework. In the second half of the 1950s, after India started to articulate bilateral concerns, China still viewed these only through the prism of great power relations and not a bilateral one. It concluded that India was using problems like Tibet (which was internal to China) or the border dispute (with India’s claim seen as illegal) to earn support from the United States. This argument also fit in with the CCP’s ideological thinking about the Indian government as a bourgeois ruling class that was capitalist and not to be trusted. This impression gained further ground after the Tibetan rebellion and the flight of the Dalai Lama in March 1959, and following the warm welcome that India gave then U.S. president Dwight Eisenhower during his visit in December 1959. Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping

claimed that India was stirring up trouble in Tibet with active assistance from the United Kingdom and the United States.⁴⁰ At the same time, China also viewed the budding Indo-Soviet relationship with concern after the visit of Soviet leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolay Bulganin to India in 1955, and especially after the sharp exchanges over India that took place between Khrushchev and Mao Zedong in Beijing in October 1959.⁴¹

Shifting equations within the strategic triangle further complicated China's India policy after 1958. The CCP saw the U.S. military buildup in the Taiwan Strait as preparation for an invasion—"play[ing] with fire at the brink of war" is how Zhou Enlai described it.⁴² After Khrushchev's visit to Washington in September 1959, the CCP felt that the two superpowers might be colluding against it.⁴³ Its biggest fear was U.S.-Soviet coordination on matters relating to China, including on its relations with India. In this changed context of triangular great power relations, China adjusted its policy to keep India neutral. Propaganda was toned down after May 1959. Mao personally drafted a conciliatory message.⁴⁴ Ambassador Pan Zili said that "China will not be so foolish as to antagonize the US in the east and again to antagonize India in the southwest," and added that "we cannot have two centers of attention, nor can we take friend [India] for foe. This is our state policy."⁴⁵ In September 1959, Zhou told the Indian ambassador about the great importance of Chinese-Indian friendship for Asia.⁴⁶ It is believed that in January 1960, the CCP's Politburo Standing Committee adopted guidelines for negotiating a compromise on the boundary question.⁴⁷ It can be inferred that this tactical adjustment in India policy was in response to the deteriorating strategic environment around China.

Zhou Enlai's visit to Delhi in April 1960—when he carried Mao's message that China's "enemy lies in the east and will come by the sea. We take India as a friendly country and we cannot turn our southern border into a national front," and a proposal to settle the boundary⁴⁸—was not successful. It reinforced the Chinese view that India was seeking to benefit from the unfavorable situation confronting China. The assessment from the Chinese embassy in Delhi was that "opposition to China and communism and dependence on America and foreign expansion are the Indian ruling circle's long-term guiding principles for foreign policy; a focal point of these guiding principles is long-term hostility toward China."⁴⁹ The CCP concluded that India's posture on the boundary was part of an overall design under U.S. coordination to pressurize China from two fronts.⁵⁰ That China looked at developments not simply from a bilateral perspective but within the context of great power triangular relationships is clear from a statement attributed to Mao. He is reported to have said that

Our fight with India is a complicated international question; it is not that only India is a problem, both the US and USSR and others are supporting India. They think they can teach us a lesson by dragging us into the arena at a time when we are in difficulty. But we shall not succumb to their scheme.⁵¹

That is why Mao described the 1962 border war as a politico-military war (*zhengzhi junshi zhang*). He decided on the strategy, tactics, and timing with a twofold goal: to show the superpowers that India was not a dependable Asian partner and to coerce India back to a neutral posture.

The border war achieved little. It did not draw India back to a neutral posture—on the contrary, Nehru called the war the “final culmination of the deterioration in relations between India and China.”⁵² India sought military assistance from the West. Chinese hopes that India might be more amenable to resolving the boundary question did not pan out.⁵³ This is a recurring problem for China—by relying on coercion, it produces the opposite result from what it says it wants. Proposals by Zhou Enlai in December 1962, March 1963, and April 1963 to resume negotiations, as well as his statement that “we have not given up our desire for friendship with India,”⁵⁴ drew cold responses from India. Instead of resetting relations, China’s actions led to a freeze for a quarter of a century. China’s goal of Asian solidarity as an anti-U.S. front suffered and its India policy collapsed.

Before drawing conclusions about this first phase of China’s India policy, two other propositions need addressing. First, there is a view that the inner-party struggle that Mao was waging over economic policy during the Great Leap Forward may have impacted relations with India. This paper does not examine the immediate circumstances leading to the border war. It is possible that the domestic economic crisis and simultaneous deterioration of the environment along the India-China boundary were correlated so far as the scope and timing of the Chinese attack on India is concerned. But there is evidence that points to a fair degree of consensus within the CCP leadership on the handling of India from 1959 until the border war, notwithstanding a letter from Wang Jiaxiang, formerly the ambassador to the Soviet Union, to Zhou Enlai in February 1961 that new methods should be employed to break through the impasse over the boundary question.⁵⁵ On the whole, China’s India policy appears to have been a collective decision. Second, there is the Tibet factor to consider. This was undoubtedly a bilateral concern in the early years, but China’s initial deep concerns over India’s intentions had been resolved by 1954. Chinese writings, including leadership statements, in the latter part of the 1950s are usually concerned with the Anglo-U.S. efforts in Tibet. India’s role is generally viewed from this broader perspective.

Three conclusions might be drawn from this first phase of China’s India policy. First, China regarded India as unequal, ideologically aligned with the West, and therefore untrustworthy. Second, its India policy was determined by the interplay of great power relations. The main objective was to relieve strategic pressure on China and this shaped tactics with India. Third, India may have let pass an opportunity that presented itself between mid-1959 and the end of 1960, when China made a tactical adjustment in its policy.

China's India Policy, 1965–1988

After 1965, China was preoccupied with the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and relations with India were on the backburner. On May 1, 1970, Mao Zedong asked the senior Indian official in Beijing, Brajesh Mishra,⁵⁶ to convey the following message to his government: “We cannot keep on quarreling like this. We should try and be friends again. India is a great country. Indian people are good people. We will be friends again someday.”⁵⁷ Mao’s remarks were not random but carefully prepared. A Foreign Ministry official told Mishra that these remarks “represent the basic principle guiding the relations between the two countries.”⁵⁸ Further signals were sent in July through Zhou,⁵⁹ and in August when Vice Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua indicated that China would respond favorably to Indian proposals for improving ties.⁶⁰ What prompted China to make a fresh overture in 1970? While India’s then prime minister Indira Gandhi had provided an opening by indicating her desire to improve relations at a press conference on January 1, 1969, there is no evidence to suggest that Mao’s overture was for bilateral reasons.⁶¹ China did not directly respond, and its anti-India rhetoric continued for an extended period thereafter. The reasons for Mao’s outreach lay elsewhere.

The alliance with the Soviet Union that had been the cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy had been unwinding since the late 1950s because Beijing was not willing to be in a relationship of “leading and be led.”⁶² In early 1969, the wheels finally came off the alliance following the border clashes (at Damanskii / Zhenbao island) that marked the beginning of hostilities. Mao declared: “We are now confronted with a formidable enemy.”⁶³ According to Tang Jiaxuan, a former foreign minister, the years between 1969 and 1979 were marked by “intense antagonism” between China and the Soviet Union.⁶⁴ The Soviet proposal for an Asian collective security system in 1969 and the probability that India might support the idea must have added to China’s concerns, leaving it worried about being encircled. Mao, according to one of his biographers, is believed to have said:

We have the Soviet Union to the north and west, India to the south and Japan to the east. If all our enemies were to unite, attacking us from north, south, east and west, what do you think we should do?⁶⁵

Richard Nixon, who became president of the United States in 1969, wanted to improve ties with China, but this initiative was at a very early stage. In 1969, China was concerned that Delhi and Washington might take advantage of a Sino-Soviet conflict. The General Mobilization Order issued by the CCP Central Committee in August 1969 reflected this concern.⁶⁶ The timing of Mao’s overture to India in 1970 should be placed in this broader international context. It was, possibly, to regain the initiative with India in order to ensure that it did not tilt toward the Soviet Union at a time when China felt very vulnerable in terms of its national security.

The Bangladesh crisis of 1971 did not permit Mao's initiative to be explored in a meaningful manner. Then foreign minister Huang Hua in his memoirs acknowledged that China suspended the process of improving relations "due to the fact that India, after signing the Treaty of Peace and Friendship with the Soviet Union, launched the third India-Pakistan war."⁶⁷ China also used the crisis to extract benefits from the United States in the great power strategic triangle by playing upon the Soviet angle in South Asia. During the brief conflict between India and Pakistan in December 1971, Chinese officials would refer to the Soviets as the "boss behind the Indian aggressors."⁶⁸ Mao and Zhou spoke contemptuously about India's capabilities. Mao remarked to then U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger in 1973 that "India did not win independence. If it did not attach itself to Britain it attaches itself to the Soviet Union."⁶⁹ Such remarks illustrate that China continued not to see India as an independent player but merely as an appendage to the great powers. The only change was that the Soviet Union replaced the United States as India's chief patron. After the collapse of its India policy in 1962, China had also adopted a subsidiary strategy of using Pakistan to counterbalance India. It assumed that improved relations with the United States and strategic ties with Pakistan would be sufficient to keep the Soviet Union in check and India sensitive to China's national security interests. The Chinese leaders did not want to acknowledge that India might be pursuing interests that were distinct from Soviet objectives in South Asia. Hence, they were unable to prevent the dismemberment of Pakistan in 1971 or the absorption of Sikkim into the Indian Union in 1975. These developments, along with its first nuclear explosion in 1974, made India the preeminent South Asian power. Mao's second attempt to craft an India policy thus also failed.

The deaths of Mao and Zhou in 1976 opened fresh possibilities. New leaders took office in India as well after the end the state of emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi. Deng Xiaoping, now China's dominant leader, proposed a "package deal" to settle the border question. He told then foreign minister (later prime minister) Atal Bihari Vajpayee that China would compromise on its stand in the eastern sector and that India could compromise on the rest.⁷⁰ The offer of a package deal was reiterated twice. The first time was when Deng was interviewed by Krishna Kumar, the editor of the *Vikrant* journal, in June 1980 after the new government of Indira Gandhi had taken office. During that interview, Deng sought to convey the message that China had the same "serious, positive and active attitude towards improving bilateral relations as Mrs. Gandhi."⁷¹ The second time was in October 1982 by Deng to a visiting delegation from the Indian Council for Social Sciences Research.⁷² In his memoirs, Huang Hua acknowledged that India had "re-adjusted its policy toward China and adopted a flexible and practical stand on the boundary question so as to create favourable conditions for the improvement of relations between the two countries," but that "due to the fact that the Indian side adhered to its stand of keeping its vested interest in the East Section while not totally giving up its unreasonable claim in the Western Section, the package deal formula could not be realized."⁷³ India did not fully explore Deng's proposal. In 1985, China shifted its stance on the package deal. A former foreign secretary who was closely involved in border negotiations, referred to the "significant hardening" on the boundary question.⁷⁴ China claimed that India had misread Deng's words.⁷⁵

Several questions remain. Why did China push for better relations and offer to settle the boundary in the period between 1979 and 1984? Did this reflect a new approach toward India by the post-Mao leadership? What led to its subsequent pullback on the package deal after 1985?

Deng, according to China's foreign minister, had three objectives when he became supreme leader in 1978: to end China's diplomatic isolation after the Cultural Revolution, to manage the "anti-hegemony" struggle, and to generally improve ties with neighbors in order to create a stable environment for economic reforms. China regarded both superpowers as hegemonic but considered the Soviet Union as posing the biggest threat to national security.⁷⁶ The heightened sense of threat posed by the Soviet Union was because of the militarization of the border (including 1 million Soviet forces in Mongolia and along the northern border), the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and the Soviet presence in Indochina, which raised the specter of encirclement again.⁷⁷ In his memoirs, Huang Hua claims that "with the large-scale invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet troops and the Soviet support for Vietnam in the latter's aggression against Cambodia, the Soviet Union succeeded in forming a strategic encirclement of China from the north, the west and the south."⁷⁸ Deng stated that the "quickened pace of global strategic deployment by Soviet hegemonists presents a serious threat to world peace and our own national security."⁷⁹ He felt it necessary to neutralize this threat by uniting more closely with the Third World and countries like the United States.⁸⁰ India's geopolitical position as well as its influence in the Third World, therefore, likely became crucial from the perspective of Chinese threat perception. Beijing's overtures to India between 1979 and 1984 to improve ties and settle their boundary dispute coincided with the period of maximum threat perception vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

This hypothesis is also supported by the language of Chinese overtures to India between 1979 and 1982. Deng told the Indian media in February 1979 that "the world is far from tranquil as a whole and this applies to the situation in Asia too. On the one hand the hegemons [that is, the Soviets] are actively pushing a policy of driving towards [the] South and this is a cause for concern."⁸¹ Within days of Deng's abovementioned interview in June 1980, this point was reiterated in a Xinhua commentary.⁸² And in his October 1982 meeting with an Indian delegation, Deng said that India and China did not pose a threat to each other and characterized the problems between them as not serious. Such conciliatory remarks from the top Chinese leader coincides with the period during which China perceived maximum threat from the Soviet Union, and supports the argument that China's India policy between 1979 and 1984 gave high priority to detaching India from the Soviet Union. For this purpose, China seemed prepared to make tactical concessions.

By the mid-1980s, the shifting dynamics of the great power strategic triangle had reduced the Soviet threat to China, whose relations with the United States were also falling short of expectations. China's leaders felt that Washington was engaged in "double-dealing tactics" over Taiwan.⁸³ Deng had made it clear to then president Jimmy Carter that the United States should not take any action that might either lead to new arms sales to the island or give the Taiwanese regime an excuse not to open negotiations for unification with China.⁸⁴

The passing of the Taiwan Relations Act by U.S. Congress in April 1979 deeply disappointed the CCP. Beijing also doubted then president Ronald Reagan's commitment to the U.S. "One China" policy,⁸⁵ and became convinced that the United States intended to follow a "One China, One Taiwan" policy.

When the Soviet Union signaled its readiness to improve ties with China during a speech by General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev in Tashkent in 1982,⁸⁶ Deng seized upon this new initiative to gradually adjust relations with the Soviet Union.⁸⁷ In 1984, he conveyed a message to Moscow that China would be "independent and non-aligned."⁸⁸ He was more explicit in an internal speech to the Central Military Commission in 1985, saying

in view of the threat of Soviet hegemonism over the years, we formed a strategic line of defence, a line stretching from Japan to Europe to the United States. Now we have altered our strategy and this represents a major change. . . . We have improved our relations with the United States and the Soviet Union. China will not play the card of another country and will not allow another country to play the China card.⁸⁹

This suggests that by the second half of the 1980s an important adjustment in Chinese foreign policy was taking shape within the context of great power triangular relations. As Sino-Soviet relations improved, the need for China to resolve fundamental bilateral issues with India in order to decouple it from the Soviet Union diminished. Although a definitive conclusion may have to await release of Chinese records, the tentative one is that China's offer to improve relations with India in 1979–1982 and its subsequent change in posture were influenced by great power triangular dynamics and not the consequence of a policy revision to bring a bilateral focus.

China's unwillingness between 1979 and 1988 to adjust its policy on matters of concern for India, such as Pakistan, also supports this conclusion. It continued its military, nuclear, and strategic cooperation with Pakistan and also pressed the country's case vis-à-vis India upon the West. While Deng urged Vajpayee to adjust relations with India's neighbors, prior to Vajpayee's visit he had urged the United States and its allies⁹⁰ to ramp up aid to Pakistan because of "the threat which Pakistan is facing from India [as well as] from the north [the Soviet presence in Afghanistan])."⁹¹ China similarly encouraged the United States to set aside its objections to Pakistan's nuclear weapons program.⁹² These examples do not suggest that there was structural readjustment in the CCP's approach to India.

As Sino-Soviet relations normalized in the second half of the 1980s, India-China relations again turned tense. The border became active again after the intrusion by Chinese troops into the Sumdorongchhu valley in 1986 and India's response, as well as when India

subsequently gave full statehood to Arunachal Pradesh in 1987. This period of high tension was followed by the visit of then prime minister Rajiv Gandhi to China in December 1988 and the beginning of the full normalization of relations. Chinese experts claim that the thaw in Sino-Soviet relations compelled India to improve ties with China.⁹³ I have argued elsewhere that both had their own good reasons to dampen tensions.⁹⁴ The very limited material available on Chinese leadership perspectives about India might not conclusively establish the hypothesis that China's India policy under Deng (as under Mao) was shaped by looking at India through the great powers prism, but the correlation between China's relations with Russia and India during the 1980s does not appear to be a coincidence.

Gandhi's 1988 trip was the first bilateral visit by either a Chinese or Indian head of government since 1960. It offered a fresh opportunity to improve the relationship. Aside from the bilateral dynamics, the triangular relationship between China, the Soviet Union, and the United States was also on the cusp of change. Deng told Gandhi that

the general world situation is changing. . . . Hegemonism, bloc politics and treaty organizations no longer work. Then what principle should we apply to guide the new international relations? One is to establish a New International Political Order, the other is to establish a New International Economic Order.⁹⁵

In this context, Deng spoke about the idea of an Asian century, saying that this could not happen unless China and India both developed. It was an indication that China was rebalancing its foreign policy with the fading of the Cold War.

Three conclusions might be drawn from this second phase of China's India policy (which ended with Gandhi's 1988 visit). First, the available material suggests that China made no fundamental change to its practice of shaping India policy primarily from the perspective of triangular great power relations. Second, a subsidiary line of policy, intended to provide an additional security guarantee, was to cultivate Pakistan as a strategic ally to keep India in check in South Asia. This policy began in 1963 and would remain in place after the normalization of relations in 1988. Third, there was a pattern of China appearing as more amenable to addressing Indian concerns when it thought it faced an existential threat that India could magnify. In sum, under Deng, China's policy continued to be crafted in such a manner as not to deal with India as an independent power center or as a stand-alone threat, but as an adjunct power that needed to be neutralized through persuasion or coercion whenever it adversely affected the balance of power between China, the Soviet Union, and the United States. At all other times, China's India policy was one of benign neglect.

China's India Policy After the Cold War

While the end of the Cold War was a transformative moment requiring significant adjustments to foreign policy for China and India, the CCP also faced the prospect that the collapse of European communism might impact its own survival. This was reinforced by its isolation from the West after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. Deng characterized the West's policy as “a world war without gun-smoke.”⁹⁶ The CCP believed that the West wanted turmoil in China. The United States was identified as its “main diplomatic adversary,”⁹⁷ but the CCP also recognized that the world had turned unipolar. China followed a three-point strategy to regain its footing in the post–Cold War world: making itself useful to the United States, enhancing neighborhood ties for peripheral security, and deepening relations with the Global South in order to maintain the sense of its great power status. The idea was to maximize maneuverability and security until a new global balance of power could be established.

Then CCP general secretary Jiang Zemin said in 1989 that “China has never been a threat to the United States; rather, China represents a huge market and offers splendid conditions for the development of economic cooperation between the two countries.”⁹⁸ He also stated that both countries had “some common interests in the Asia-Pacific region” and that “friendship and cooperation between China and the United States are also very important for the stability and prosperity of the region.”⁹⁹ The message was that China could be useful to the United States in maintaining order in Asia.¹⁰⁰ It is noteworthy that the Chinese leaders made few references, if any, to other Asian countries that might share China's burden in this task. When China perceived its regionally dominant position might be challenged, as was the case with India's nuclear tests in 1998, it joined hands with the United States to highlight its superior status.¹⁰¹

China's other priority was on securing the periphery and improving its profile in the Global South. Speaking to the military in 1993, Jiang said that, in order to keep the security environment around China peaceful, “we must follow the policy of stabilizing the neighbouring countries, making more efforts, eliminating doubts and promoting good neighbourhoods and friendship.”¹⁰² The sense of vulnerability that China felt in its periphery pushed it to stabilize its borders with Russia, the Central Asian republics, Vietnam, and India. Similarly, China began to pay greater attention to rebuilding its profile, especially in the Asia-Pacific. India-China relations after 1990 should be analyzed in the context of this post–Cold War reordering of Chinese priorities.

China at that point saw India as important because it was a peripheral state and because it had substantial influence in the Global South. Rajiv Gandhi's visit had restored normalcy and India had not joined the West in criticizing or sanctioning China after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident. Both countries wished to focus on economic development. The early finalization of the boundary, for which Gandhi's 1988 visit had laid out a roadmap,

would have provided a solid guarantee for China's peripheral security and a new paradigm for broader relations. Yet, months after Gandhi's visit, then CCP general secretary Zhao Ziyang told president George H. W. Bush that "because of the boundary dispute there were limits on how far Sino-Indian cooperation could proceed."¹⁰³ In his memoirs, India's former foreign secretary J. N. Dixit, recalls that when he discussed the boundary issue with his Chinese counterpart in early 1992, he got no indication that Beijing's stand had changed.¹⁰⁴ Another former foreign secretary, Shyam Saran, similarly notes that former premier Li Peng "dodged the question" when then prime minister P. V. Narasimha Rao tried to probe him in December 1991 about the possibility of a border settlement by drawing attention to Deng's earlier package deal proposal.¹⁰⁵ China's objective appeared to be limited to making progress on frameworks for peace and tranquility in the border areas, namely the Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement of 1993 and the Confidence Building Measures Agreement of 1996. This served Beijing's objective of pacifying its periphery and reducing the risk of India joining the anti-China camp while fully preserving China's territorial claims.

China's policy with respect to other core Indian concerns also suggested that it was pursuing a strategy of reducing risk rather than fundamentally altering direction. For instance, Beijing brushed off U.S. and Indian concerns about helping Pakistan's nuclear weapons program after 1990.¹⁰⁶ On the Kashmir issue, China suggested an adjustment by Pakistan during Jiang's 1996 visit to the country, and it possibly dissuaded the country from rocking the boat at the UN Human Rights Council in 1992 and during the Kargil War in 1999, but these were tactical moves. China never fundamentally adjusted its position regarding the UN's role or the right to self-determination of the Kashmiri people. It still refused to recognize India's sovereignty over Sikkim but expected India to recommit to Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and Taiwan. China played a crucial role in limiting India's ability to influence the 1996 discussions on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.¹⁰⁷ It dissembled on India's request to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

China's limited engagement with India in the early 1990s appeared to be driven more by its anxiety and uncertainty over the shape of the Chinese-US relationship. Deng had cautioned his successors that the United States would try to draw into its orbit and under its strategic control countries over which it had not exercised influence during the Cold War.¹⁰⁸ India fell in this category and China saw value in cultivating it as a hedge against "hegemonism."¹⁰⁹ It is in this context that the Chinese leaders talked about the "Asian Century." The idea was to keep India neutral during a period of global turbulence.

There are two possible explanations as to why China did not seek to fundamentally rework its India policy in the post-Cold War period. First, Beijing did not look at India as a true competitor because the latter's capacity constraints did not make it worthy of being looked at in those terms.¹¹⁰ Testament to this is the fact that in none of his selected works did Jiang Zemin refer to India while talking about major powers, save during his 1996 state visit to the country.¹¹¹ Second, China estimated that the differences between India and the United States were too great to allow for a true partnership between them that would pose a real threat to China. Overall, one can conclude that China's India policy in the early

1990s intended to ease the strategic pressure on itself in a unipolar world, but not to make the concessions required to permanently resolve key questions, leading to the relationship reaching what former foreign secretary J. N. Dixit described in the mid-1990s as an “inactive plateau.”¹¹²

A second opportunity came after China was caught by surprise on the dynamic between India and the United States after the former’s nuclear tests in 1998. Chinese scholars started writing about how Washington was looking anew at Delhi as having a capacity to create a balance favorable to the United States in Asian geopolitics.¹¹³ Concerned again that India might gravitate toward a greater power, China reengaged, including on the boundary issue with the establishment of a Special Representatives mechanism. This effort peaked in 2005 when Beijing and Delhi declared that their relationship had acquired a “global and strategic character.”¹¹⁴ But this “symmetry of consensus,” as former foreign secretary Shyam Saran called it, proved to be very short-lived.¹¹⁵ From the second half of the 2000s, China felt more comfortable within the triangle of great powers and its economy vastly outgrew India’s. Thus there was a tendency to patronize India that is best reflected in former foreign minister Li Zhaoxing’s comment that “sometimes the sincere attitude and generosity of China is seen as weakness by some Indian politicians.”¹¹⁶ This is a more realistic reflection of what the Chinese leadership really thought about India. The fact that India does not warrant a single mention in the memoirs of Qian Qichen,¹¹⁷ China’s foreign minister in 1988–1998 and vice premier in charge of foreign policy in 1993–2003, shows the relatively low strategic priority that China’s top leadership attached to their relations. Likewise, India is not mentioned in Jiang Zemin’s selected works from 1989 up till 1998—significant years in the bilateral relationship.

By the mid-2000s, China had gained in confidence after the full normalization of relations with the United States and a new partnership with Russia. This was, former foreign minister Li Zhaoxing writes in his memoirs, “conducive to China in expanding its room for maneuver in the international community and coping with strategic pressure from the West.”¹¹⁸ In 2002, then vice premier Qian Qichen stated: “The US certainly will not stop plotting to disintegrate and westernize China, but it cannot pay the price of a rupture of its friendly relations with China.”¹¹⁹ Similarly, of the experience of the Russia-China boundary negotiations in the first half of the 2000s, former foreign minister Tang Jiaxuan writes that “The proper settlement of the China-Russia border dispute has exemplary value for the settlement of boundary issues with other neighbors and great significance to conducting our periphery diplomacy and creating a sound external environment for our domestic economic development.”¹²⁰ Thus, the normalization of U.S.-China relations and the partnership with Russia meant the reduction of strategic pressure and the return to the balance-of-power situation that China felt comfortable with. At the same time, India-China relations began to experience friction¹²¹ as a result of Delhi’s frustration at Beijing not treating its concerns with greater seriousness and sensitivity. Yet Dai Bingguo—state councillor in 2008–2013 and China’s top diplomat dealing with India—writes in his memoirs about the “many strategic commonalities” as being more important in determining the future course of the relationship than the existential bilateral problems.¹²² This shows that China continued to

view India only through the global strategic lens and remained blind to the bilateral dimensions. In the instances when India pushed back against China, it was held responsible for the resulting tension because it was drawing the wrong conclusion that China would put it down at every opportunity.¹²³ And, because India's push back was not systematic, Chinese leaders were satisfied that their policy was "an efficient model of handling the relationship through positive interaction."¹²⁴

As tension has built up in the relationship, especially after 2013, Chinese researchers have placed the responsibility on India's misreading of Beijing's intentions. A common view seems to be that, while it has shown goodwill with the best of intentions, China has not received the same in return.¹²⁵ A careful parsing of these writings suggests that India's good faith is not judged in bilateral terms but in the context of global and regional order. There are the following several recurring Chinese narratives:

- China has never viewed India as a threat, but India has at times viewed China as a threat.
- The Indian Ocean is a strategic crossroad and the soft underbelly of Eurasia, and therefore a key area of strategic interest for China, but its presence there has triggered Indian anxieties.¹²⁶
- India's concerns are overblown or misdirected—China is seeking not confrontation but strategic stability.¹²⁷
- The United States, on the other hand, is utilizing India as a potential geostrategic balancer to China.¹²⁸
- The United States poses an existential threat because it does not want to see China rise. Strategic tensions with India have thus increased because of Indian intentions to join a U.S.-led coalition against China.¹²⁹
- This trend has increased under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.¹³⁰ He has broken the restraints of India's traditional nonalliance policy in its relations with United States.¹³¹

The underlying logic in these narratives is that India was never a key concern in the global vision of China, who did not consider the country to be a major threat. On the other hand, India has viewed China as an obstacle and aligned with the United States to neutralize it. In short, India's alignment with the United States is the problem here.

The Chinese strategic and academic community's placement of India in the context of great power relationships is mirrored in the way the Chinese leadership looks at the world and India. In Hu Jintao's second term and Xi Jinping's first term as president, there was a relatively optimistic view in China about relations with the United States as the "anchor for

global stability and a booster for world peace.”¹³² In his 2013 meeting with then president Barack Obama, Xi talked about expanding the converging interests in an all-round way.¹³³ The United States, Russia, and the European Union were identified as consequential powers of the new global order along with China,¹³⁴ with all of whom it appeared to enjoy good relationships. Confident about their country’s situation within the great power relationships, Chinese leaders continued to speak about bilateral ties with India having “entered the track of sound development,”¹³⁵ and about the Chinese “dragon” and the Indian “elephant” joining in a duet for improving ties.¹³⁶ China’s leaders shone the spotlight on what they regarded as shared strategic and developmental interests, and dismissed India’s bilateral concerns as “local” issues to be managed appropriately. When India pressed them about the escalation in the border regions or other concerns, they would say that its focus on such problems was complicating the relationship because it was undermining strategic trust by dominating the discourse.¹³⁷ They would also indulge in gaslighting, saying that the two sides should control “some specific issues in bilateral relations by putting them in the right place of China-India relations, without politicizing and complicating them to hamper the overall development of China-India relations.”¹³⁸ For example, in a meeting with the author, Foreign Minister Wang Yi placed the onus of bilateral harmony on Delhi, saying: “It is hoped that India will handle sensitive issues with prudence.”¹³⁹ On the other hand, on bilateral matters of Chinese interest, such as India’s position on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor or the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese leaders would invariably say that it was important to read Beijing’s intentions in the right way, meaning that India should accept and accommodate China’s strategic interests.

After 2018, as the challenge to China’s rise from the United States has become clearer to the Chinese leadership, Xi started to talk about the world as being far from tranquil as a result of acts of containment, suppression, or confrontation.¹⁴⁰ China felt the strategic pressure from the United States. Its behavior toward India also changed in what Xi called the “new period of turbulence and transformation.”¹⁴¹ The discussion in Beijing focused more on U.S. intentions toward China and on Delhi’s relationship with Washington. India’s actions began to be judged on whether they helped or hindered China’s objectives vis-à-vis the United States, without attributing independent agency to India. One commentator linked the two relationships thus: “Given the context that the west has misjudgments against China, India-China relations can hardly develop without any impact from China-west relations.”¹⁴² Chinese refusal to grant India agency was further evidenced in a patronizing remark by the Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin, who said that he hoped that India would follow an “independent diplomatic policy.”¹⁴³ This came after the Indian foreign minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar had stated that “independence . . . remains a factor of continuity for us.” More importantly, Wang’s remarks came after India carried out a naval drill near the Andaman and Nicobar Islands with a U.S. aircraft carrier. Recent Chinese assessments claim that the signing of foundational agreements between the Indian and U.S. militaries means the two countries are moving toward an alliance,¹⁴⁴ and that this has shifted the

balance of power and damaged strategic trust.¹⁴⁵ A prominent commentator on the relationship, Ye Hailin, has argued that China has made up its mind that India will lean to the United States to derive benefits and that China will become the target of containment.¹⁴⁶

Before drawing conclusions about the most recent phase of China's India policy, it is necessary to look briefly at the escalating tension and aggression on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) from 2013. This has been the longest period in the relationship when the border has remained active. It is not a coincidence that this is happening when India is enhancing its strategic relations with the United States. China tracks India's relations with the United States very carefully and is concerned at the synergy between them. Chinese scholarly writings and official statements make the point that the United States is pursuing an anti-China strategy and that India should keep a distance from it. China uses coercion on the LAC to warn India while keeping the possibility of geopolitical backlash low, according to a recent study by Ketian Zhang, based on interviews with Chinese officials and scholars.¹⁴⁷ According to this, the Chinese assessment is that India's cooperation with the United States has not yet reached a level that might compel Washington to intervene in support of Delhi, and that in these circumstances China's relative strength along the LAC is adequate to unsettle India without provoking a serious backlash. India has expressed puzzlement at the Chinese motives for the border incidents, but the correlation between the growing strategic relationship between Delhi and Washington and the deteriorating ties between Delhi and Beijing seem to bear out the basic premise of this paper that China sees India mostly through the lens of China's relationships with the United States, Russia, and other great powers.

The analysis of the three phases of the India-China relationship leads to four conclusions. First, there is continuity in China's policy on account of its perception of India. It regards India as unequal and therefore unworthy of being looked at as a stand-alone power. Second, India becomes relevant to China primarily in the context of great power relationships, and especially U.S.-China relations. The fear of containment and subversion by other great powers influences the way in which Beijing judges Delhi's actions and foreign policy. Little or no agency is given to India as an independent actor with its own set of priorities. Third, China is myopic in its expectations from India. It expects India to treat its concerns as global in nature and seeks immediate redress while also wanting India to regard its own concerns as localized problems that should be managed appropriately. In other words, India should be satisfied that China is not making these problems worse. Finally, China's leaders believe that the nature of India's polity as well as the asymmetry of power between the two countries does not require them to reshape their policy in a way that meaningfully accommodates Indian interests. As a result, China has been dealing with India not in any strategic sense, but merely in a tactical way. There are long periods of relative neglect followed by shorter ones when China has come under strategic pressure and has tended to use coercive tactics to force India toward neutrality. The question is whether this basic premise will remain valid, and if not whether this might lead to a strategic miscalculation by China?

An Assessment of China's India Policy and a Suggested Strategy for India

Two 2022 studies of the India-China relationship by Xiaoyu Pu¹⁴⁸ and Ketian Zhang¹⁴⁹ are good starting points to assessing China's India policy. Xiaoyu Pu is right that security and status are drivers of international rivalry and conflict, and that India-China relations have been shaped by dilemmas over both. He is also right that power asymmetry makes China less sensitive to India's concerns. But it cannot be concluded from this that China is not motivated by status rivalry. To the contrary, despite China's superior view of itself and the lower status that it accords to India, it has always been apprehensive about India's potential as a counterweight due to its geopolitical location and its democratic system that allows it to align more easily with the West. China's policy creates the impression (even if not intended) that it sees status competition with India as a zero-sum game. Xiaoyu Pu argues that this is not the case and that China's lack of support for India's membership of bodies like the Nuclear Suppliers Group and the UN Security Council is not a "complete block" and that China might have felt that these are highly complicated matters that merit further deliberation. However, Beijing's recent efforts to even block proposed listings of terrorists by the UN Security Council's 1267 Committee is suggestive of zero-sum games.¹⁵⁰

Xiaoyu Pu's assertion that India's historical memory and domestic politics make its perception of China more negative and competitive than China's apprehension of India is also not supported by the analysis in the earlier sections of this paper. Motivated reasoning on the Chinese side as well, both as a consequence of its perception of its own historical past and as a result of domestic politics, also plays a role in India-China dynamics. The CCP has kept alive the narrative of a righteous war against India in 1962 as a means of psychological pressure on the country and to remind the Chinese people that the party is a resolute defender of their territory. This fits in with the CCP's claim that it has restored China's rightful place in the world and is part of its effort to keep its legitimacy as the ruling party. Therefore, the contention that having an incentive to alter the status quo in order to accumulate greater relative status might equally apply to China as to India.

In her examination of the rationale behind China's military activities along the LAC, Ketian Zhang argues that Chinese behavior follows a rational cost-benefit calculation. I agree with her contention that there has been a low geopolitical cost for China for its use of coercion against India, and that it has consistently used militarized coercive tools for this reason. However, her conclusion that there is no evidence of a change in India's behavior after 2020 in terms of responding to China's coercive tactics deserves further scrutiny. She bases this line of thinking on interviews conducted with Chinese scholars and semi-official sources. These contend that the only power that has interests as well as capabilities in South Asia is the United States, and that India will never formally become its ally. They also think the United States would not get directly involved militarily in the India-China dispute because this will be an intolerable burden. There is also the view in China that India is hesitant to

play the role of a junior ally and has a long tradition of pursuing an independent foreign policy. Finally, Zhang writes that the “QUAD has not changed China’s view that the US and India will not form alliances which will increase China’s risks of military escalation in the Sino-Indian border dispute.”¹⁵¹ While Zhang does not rule out the possibility of an alliance in the future, her underlying assumption is that this is remote. She therefore concludes that the probability of a geopolitical backlash to future coercive measures by China will continue to remain low.

Even if China’s leaders are correct in assuming that the Indian-U.S. relationship will not become an alliance, it is still worth examining whether there is a potential for strategic miscalculation by China after the military standoff in Ladakh. Two Chinese assumptions—that India will not intentionally escalate militarily in response to low-level coercion and that India will not form alliances against the coercer—should be weighed against the changes in Indian strategic thinking since 2020.

First, the ambiguity that prevailed in India’s decisionmaking and strategic circles as to whether China is a partner or a rival has been replaced by strategic clarity. China’s behavior is now perceived as adversarial and few are willing to give it the benefit of the doubt. The Galwan incident has reshaped national public opinion about China.

Second, the idea of strategic restraint has been redefined. This has involved a change in risk-taking appetite among the political class, as a result of which the Snow Leopard counter-operation at Rezang La/Rechin La was carried out in August 2022. This was an intentional escalation by India that was not anticipated by China. Thus the Chinese assumption that there will be no immediate backlash to low-level coercion on the LAC because India is risk-averse may no longer be valid.

Third, Chinese scholars may also need to revisit the idea that an Indian response to future military coercion will remain indefinitely low. India is now more willing and committed to enhancing military capacity in preparation for the situation of armed coexistence that it expects to prevail along the LAC. Judging India’s future responses and behavior on the basis of current capacity may not be valid.

Fourth, the geopolitical backlash is also likely to increase for China. The vestiges of non-aligned thinking that might have restrained India in the past from pursuing deeper relations with the West have evaporated. While it might be true that Delhi is not seeking a treaty alliance with the United States, there are other means for it to impose backlash cost on China. India’s capability to use its geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean and its leverage with the littoral states has the capacity to complicate China’s strategic environment as the latter seeks to move closer to the center of the world’s stage. A case in point is the August 2022 incident involving a Chinese surveillance vessel that docked in a Sri Lankan port.¹⁵² India’s capacity to impose costs will grow along with its economy in this decade. China therefore needs to calculate geopolitical backlash costs not only in the context of the LAC but also amid its wider ambitions in the Indo-Pacific.

Fifth, China's assumption that the economic asymmetry between the two countries will limit the geopolitical backlash because its market is critical for India is premised on a prediction that India's economy will continue to grow at a lesser pace than China's and that its dependence on Chinese imports will not decline. This may not entirely be a valid premise because several factors suggest that India can sustain a higher growth rate than China, and also that some amount of decoupling will become government policy. China also needs to take a broader view of India's economic development and to recognize that it may need the Indian market if wants to supplant the United States as the world's largest economy.

Finally, China now recognizes that the Quad and other plurilateral arrangements that India has entered into since 2018 are not "sea foam," as Foreign Minister Wang Yi once termed this.¹⁵³ The Quad may not result in an alliance, but it is a step toward credibly signaling that India's future foreign and national security policy should neither be judged by its past record nor taken for granted.

There is therefore a case to be made that China should make a fresh assessment of the future direction of its relationship with India and to adjust its policy. Merely because it does not consider India to be a primary threat at this time¹⁵⁴ should not lead it to think India has no agency in global and regional affairs or to not give it the respect and status of an equal. If the relationship is not to become a zero-sum game, the onus lies on China as the larger power.

Policy Recommendations

What can India do in this situation to mold China's India policy? Its starting point should be that the Chinese view of India may be hardwired into the party-state system. Given China's strong predilection for regarding itself as superior and its deep suspicion about India's real intentions, Delhi must accept the fact that strategic competition will continue and might expand to play a more prominent role in India-China relations. India should not expect this to change unless there is a significant shift in the balance of power. That can happen when India's economy reaches higher levels, its diplomacy becomes multidimensional, and its military and technological capacities are greatly augmented. There are indications that this is beginning to happen, but it might still be a decade away. This decade is likely to be one of challenges because India will have to live with the power asymmetry and related Chinese efforts to use coercive and non-coercive tools to play on its security and status dilemmas.

In these circumstances, it is important for India to convey signals more credibly and transparently. This has begun through statements by the Indian leadership that place India's bilateral concerns (including the boundary and related LAC concerns) in a prominent position and by stating that the relationship will remain tense so long as China does not

address them meaningfully. Consistency is required in such signaling by India. While this might still not make China change tack, it will credibly convey a new sense of purpose that India has about their dealings. The Indian military has also shown greater capacity for readiness along the LAC. However, military readiness by itself may not be sufficient to deter China without significant augmentation of capacity to tackle the technology-driven military systems that Beijing is placing in Tibet. What is also needed after careful cost-benefit calculations is a synergy of diplomatic, military, and economic tools. This requires a whole-of-government approach, something that has so far been patchy.

The Galwan incident has shown that, contrary to Indian hopes, preventive measures and the pursuit of peace and tranquility may not be sufficient to deter a China that believes it has military advantage along the LAC. Thus, given that there is likely to be a military imbalance there in the short term, India should prioritize the pursuit of higher-level risk management. This is qualitatively different than seeking peace and tranquility—risk management shifts the focus from the ground-tactical level to the politico-strategic level. Dialogue at this level would reduce the risk of escalation to an undesirable threshold.

Thus, the resumption of political dialogue, which has been suspended since November 2019, is essential. It is untenable that two major Asian countries that are also neighbors as well as nuclear weapon states refrain from conversations about the state of their relationship. The dialogue needs to be resumed at the earliest possible time, notwithstanding China's obduracy in fully defusing the crisis along the LAC by reversing its actions. Difficult as it is for both sides to make the first move in this regard, it is nonetheless a prerequisite for the risk management that is so essential in this decade when their strategic rivalry will likely grow.

Chinese public and private statements appear to suggest a three-point approach for both countries to better appreciate their respective intentions and to avoid friction. These are to maintain strategic communication, to align development goals, and to manage disputes without aggravation or escalation.¹⁵⁵ These are noble objectives, but China has tended to make these unidirectional. Relegating India's topics of interest to the non-strategic realms makes two-way communication difficult and breeds misunderstanding. Since part of the problem lies in the way that China perceives India as not having global influence, one way of overcoming this issue might be to redefine the scope of strategic communication and alignment of developmental goals narrowly, so that there is perceived equality for purposes of dialogue.

Parsing Chinese leadership statements over the past decade shows that they almost never refer to India as a major power in the global context and rather as a major power in the Asia-Pacific context. The State Council document on China's Policies in the Asia-Pacific released in 2017 recognizes that this region has the strongest potential and the necessity for China to enhance mutual political trust among the major powers, which includes India alongside Japan, Russia, and the United States. The possibility of centering bilateral strategic communication around the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific might be explored without permitting nomenclature to get in the way. This will need a certain amount of adjustment on both

sides. India may have to accept that its national power is not yet sufficient to persuade China to treat it as a global equal. China may have to accept that there is a different great power triangle in the Asia-Pacific/Indo-Pacific, of which Russia is not a part. The United States and its regional allies are the strongest corner of this triangle, China is the second corner, and India the third. In the foreseeable future, no other country or grouping, including Russia, the Association of South East Asian Nations, or the Gulf Cooperation Council will be able to combine economic heft and military capability to replace any of these players.

The Indo-Pacific is likely to be the geoeconomic center of the world for the next several decades, and China's prosperity and future global status are intrinsically linked to it. Thus, Beijing would be wise to adjust its worldview and accept that there is an important subset of great power relationships in the Indo-Pacific and to treat India as a necessary interlocutor in this regional context. In March 2022, when he visited India for the first time after the 2020 eastern Ladakh crisis, Foreign Minister Wang Yi told India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval that China respected "India's traditional role in the region" and was ready to "explore the 'China-India Plus' cooperation in South Asia."¹⁵⁶ In the past, such statements have largely been lip service. Regardless, treating India as a regional power may make it possible for the strategic communication that China is proposing to happen in a way that allows for risk management and a better appreciation of each other's development objectives. This is more likely to lead to a situation in which the two countries do not see competition as a zero-sum game. This is because India's geographic and political advantages in the northern Indian Ocean make the power asymmetry between them in the Indo-Pacific less than the one at the global level.

Conclusion

This paper argues that, since its founding, the People's Republic of China has treated its relations with India as subordinate to its relations with great powers such as the United States and Russia. Ebbs and flows in this strategic triangle have had knock-on effects on the India-China relationship. China's approach stems from its treatment of India as an unequal and inferior competitor for security and status in a global context, and therefore its refusal to look at the relationship through a bilateral lens. In order to change this, India could engage in dialogue with China to emphasize the bilateralness of relations and their power dynamics in the regional context of the Indo-Pacific. It could also undertake risk management at the higher politico-strategic level. The augmentation of India's military capacity and the multidirectional diplomatic effort that has begun should continue with adequate resources provided to both. This process will need to take place over the next five to ten years alongside using leverage with other countries and prioritizing domestic economic growth, so as to give China reasons to rethink its India policy and incentives to address Indian concerns. India's capacity on its own and in conjunction with other parties to impact upon China's expanding

presence in the northern Indian Ocean should be continually enhanced, and China should be encouraged to make a correct strategic judgment in this regard. There is no guarantee that such an approach will succeed but it is worth trying, given the high stakes. India should prepare for difficult times while continuing to try to steer, through dialogue, China's India policy in a more mutually satisfactory direction.

About the Author

Vijay Gokhale is a nonresident senior fellow at Carnegie India. Gokhale retired from the Indian Foreign Service in January 2020 after a diplomatic career that spanned thirty-nine years. From January 2018 to January 2020, he served as the foreign secretary of India.

Prior to his term as foreign secretary, Gokhale had served as India's high commissioner to Malaysia from January 2010 to October 2013, as ambassador of India to the Federal Republic of Germany from October 2013 to January 2016, and as ambassador of India to the People's Republic of China from January 2016 to October 2017. He has served as head of the India-Taipei Association, in Taiwan, from July 2003 to January 2007. During his time in the headquarters of the Ministry of External Affairs, he has also worked in key positions in the East Asia Division, including as the joint secretary (Director General) for East Asia from March 2007 to December 2009.

He has worked extensively on matters relating to the Indo-Pacific region with a special emphasis on Chinese politics and diplomacy. Since his retirement from the Foreign Service, Gokhale has contributed opinion pieces to the *New York Times*, *Foreign Policy*, the *Hindu*, the *Times of India*, and the *Indian Express*. He is also the author of three recent books: *Tiananmen Square: The Making of a Protest* (HarperCollins India, May 2021), *The Long Game: How the Chinese Negotiate with India* (Penguin Random House India, July 2021), and *After Tiananmen: The Rise of China* (HarperCollins India, September 2022).

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