Article

The Double-Edged Sword: Reviewing India–China Relations

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Abstract

As Asia's largest and most rapidly rising powers in contemporary global politics, relations between India and China are becoming evermore intertwined with each other. Clear commonalities typify this symbiosis, including a shared civilisational basis, a mutual desire to rebecome great powers in international relations and common modernisation goals. At the same time, relations are beset by a number of issues, most notably long-standing territorial disputes, frictions over regional hegemony and wider diplomatic tensions (most prominently relating to China–Pakistan and India–United States ties). As such, India–China relations can be considered to resemble a 'double-edged sword', whereby elements of their interaction can be regarded as having *concurrent benefits and liabilities*. This article explores the historical roots and contemporary realisation of such a core dynamic over the last 75 years of relations between New Delhi and Beijing and investigates how their strategic goals are often simultaneously convergent *and* divergent.

Keywords

China, India, threat perception, security dilemma, multipolar, Galwan

As Asia's largest and most rapidly rising powers in contemporary global politics, relations between India and China are becoming evermore intertwined with each other. Clear commonalities typify this symbiosis, from a shared historical perspective within both states of being major civilisations of systemic importance to a mutual desire from their leaders—and increasingly their populations—to restore their status as great powers in the international system (Ogden, 2017). Shared historical experiences of highly negative colonial interventions by Western powers (Zhu, 2011, p. 1) further underpin such common heritages and outlooks, as do India and China now possessing some of the world's largest territorial, demographic, economic and military abilities. A collective adherence to modernisation and development policies also galvanises the two entities together,

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whereby achieving increased levels of bilateral, regional and global trade is a common aim, which is serving to successfully augment their power across all domains of international affairs.

Such has been the rate of their economic expansion in the last decades (albeit for longer and faster by Beijing compared with New Delhi's performance) that both states are now exerting more influence in global diplomacy than they have ever done. Expressing similar demands in the face of similar challenges is becoming more evident in issues ranging from how both India and China can effectively manage the climate emergency as developing states to gaining more representative voices in existing and new multilateral institutions. These perspectives are buoyed by ongoing and residual suspicions concerning the intentions underlying the United States (US) hegemony (Pant, 2011, p. 236), which are themselves amplified by a shared adherence to having an international system resting upon multipolarity and not just US-led unipolarity. Overarching these commonalities is a belief in the twenty-first century being the Asian Century, wherein the region will become the essential fulcrum of international relations, and whereby maintaining a stable and peaceful Asian sphere buttresses both their core interests.

Despite these strong positive overlaps in relations, ties between India and China are also beset by a host of negative elements. Such tensions are frequently exacerbated by their essential proximity, both geographically and in terms of their policy goals. These negative elements include long-standing territorial disputes (concerning Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin) that have been intensified by historical and more contemporary disputes (in the guise of the 1962 War and the recent Galwan skirmish in 2020 that resulted in fatalities on both sides). More broadly, observers have also noted distrust-ridden competition between the two sides as they vie for 'influence, power, hegemony and profits' (Scott, 2008, p. 2), which permeates New Delhi and Beijing's mutual search for trade and energy security. This dynamic extends out into the broader region, most notably concerning the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) but also regarding each states' bilateral relations across South Asia, South East Asia, East Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Here China's close relation with Pakistan is of foremost concern to New Delhi, while India's increasing ties with the US (plus Japan and Australia) is the most worrying for Beijing. The latter is particularly significant since it concerns Asian balance-of-power dynamics, as well as which state will be able to claim—or be prevented from claiming—leadership and hegemony over either South Asia or East Asia, and the broader Asian region as a whole. The fact that both states are amassing evermore-powerful military capabilities through common modernisation drives only serves to further intensify these substantial mutual pressures.

As a result, India–China relations can be seen as representing a 'double-edged sword', whereby elements of their interaction can be regarded as having *concurrent benefits and liabilities*. With both states continuing to rise to ever-greater international prominence, and with the bandwidth of their global interests also increasing exponentially, the scope and scale of these benefits and liabilities are evermore accumulating in nature. Within more realist thinking in international relations, such an observation pertains to their relations being a classic example of

a security dilemma, with any strategic actions carried out by one side being inevitably seen as a threat to the other's interests (Pant, 2011, p. 240). Conversely, more constructivist-centred accounts would seek to focus upon how shared interests and aims, as well as fears and threats, are 'the product of human agency, of social construction' (Hopf, 1998, p. 182), which can provide a way for India–China relations to remove themselves from the security dilemma and to focus upon positive-sum outcomes. In these ways, partnerships and rivalries between states can be fruitfully understood through shared social experiences and their psychological impacts (Pardesi, 2010, p. 562), whose roots are historical in nature but are also embedded in contemporary interaction.

From this basis, threat perception acts as a useful and vital lens through which we can better analyse and understand relations between New Delhi and Beijing. Defined by Baldwin (1971) as the 'anticipation of harm to either one's material assets or belief systems', threat perceptions are shaped by historical interactions between states that then form the basis for predictions concerning how actors may respond in certain situations. In these ways, past enmity, clashes and competitions frequently create an ecosystem of suspicion and hostility for present relations, enhancing perceived threats (Singer, 1958, p. 93), which is certainly evident in India–China relations concerning the legacy of the 1962 War, as well as other memories of animosity and conflict. Overcoming such negativities is thus central to fulfilling positive relations, which highlights how 'even the prospect of large absolute gains for both parties does not elicit their co-operation so long as each fears how the other will use its increased capabilities' (Waltz, 1978, p. 105). In this sense, for cooperative ties between New Delhi and Beijing to prevail, the positive side of the double-edged sword needs to dominate its negative side. In the longer term, this will thus require maintaining a partnership based on common defence and political and economic goals (Naidu, 2008, p. 3).

Analysing such dynamics through these useful heuristic devices, this article proceeds in the following fashion. First, it sets out the historical evolution of India–China relations over the last 75 years, from their consecration as modern states in the late 1940s until the 2010s. Using this evolution as an analytical touchstone, the article then interrogates the major aspects of contemporary New Delhi–Beijing relations in the last decade. Here, we specifically decode the two states' interactions across a myriad of factors before reaching a set of Conclusions that evaluates points of convergence and divergence in India–China ties and pertinently asks whether positive or negative relations are currently ascendant.

The Primer of History and Experience

The emergence of modern India in 1947 and the later emergence of modern China in the shape of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 came in the aftermath of shared negative colonial experiences by both sides. Although somewhat dissimilar in nature in that India had been firmly subjugated and occupied by the British Raj for several centuries, while imperial China had been forced to give repeated territorial and economic concessions to a range of mainly European

powers from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, both states began their modern incarnations as materially weak and vulnerable entities. As a result, in the immediate period after the Second World War, both India and China faced substantial political, social and developmental challenges (Tellis, 2004, p. 134). Moreover, for both sets of their ruling elites, their states had lost a considerable amount of status due to the actions of external actors, which fed into deep-seated anti-imperialist and anti-colonial sentiments in both New Delhi and Beijing. Evincing a clear mistrust and suspicion of the international system and its architects, such a shared experience and common threat perception bolstered the possibility of there being a steadfast alliance between the two new postcolonial states (Sidhu & Yuan, 2003, pp. 10–11).

From this basis, in the first decades of their modern relations, and against the façade of the emergent bipolar politics of the Cold War, diplomatic ties were initiated in April 1950, with India being the first non-socialist country to form such ties with communist China (Ogden, 2014, p. 256). Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai conducted respective state visits in 1954, and a sense of solidarity, friendship and optimism permeated these relations (Sidhu & Yuan, 2003, p. 11). There was also a realisation that standing together could help both states to better withstand the machinations of the external great powers and to foment greater stability in the wider Asian region. Reflective of such sentiments, the phrase *Hindi–Chini bhai bhai* ('Indians and Chinese are brothers') was widely used by politicians from both sides (Fang, 2013, p. 2) and was further demonstrated by the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' of the 1954 'Panchsheel Agreement', as first elucidated by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. The first of these (respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty) encapsulates common threat perceptions of being invaded again, which was bolstered by the second Principle (non-aggression) that eschewed the use of military force in international affairs and the third Principle (non-interference in each other's internal affairs) that resolutely underscored the need to preserve autonomy and self-reliance from external influence. The final two Principles (equality and shared benefit, and peaceful co-existence) reinforced these mantras and sought to restore both states' international stature and provide an environment in which they could pursue mutual development and modernisation goals.

Despite this early positivity and some fruitful negotiations concerning the disputed sections of their shared borders (themselves a negative legacy of the colonial period), as well as some concerted cultural exchanges, relations began to decline by the end of the 1950s, as their 'brief honeymoon period' (Sidhu & Yuan, 2003, p. 11) did not endure. Although India had conceded suzerainty over Tibet and recognised it as an autonomous region of China (which had annexed it in 1950), New Delhi's harbouring of the Dalai Lama in India—after his escape from Lhasa to Dharmsala in 1959—injected elements of distrust and frustration into their diplomacy (Fang, 2013, p. 2); so too did Chinese support of the Mizo and Naga insurrections in India's northeast (see Norbu, 1997). In turn, Beijing began to perceive New Delhi as potentially threatening its leadership of the Third World, especially given India's pivotal role in the Non-Aligned Movement, which Nehru had formally co-founded in 1961. Thus, even though both sides adhered to a

similar worldview, as shown by the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence', such an adherence also bought innate tensions concerning how each side could successfully pursue their core strategic interests. As per our analogy of a double-edged sword, what appeared to have been agreements then became tensions and commonalities became differences.

Nowhere was this clearer and most virulently displayed than the India–China border dispute, which represented a common interest regarding territorial integrity, but which—if unequivocally pursued by either New Delhi or Beijing—would necessitate a confrontation between the two sides. Shared beliefs on both sides based upon common perceptions—centuries-old and even millennia-old in nature—concerning the weight of their civilisational significance, as well as their prior status as great powers since from around 1 AD until at least the mid-1750s during which time they each controlled between a third and a quarter of all global trade (see Maddison, 2003), further complicated this dynamic. More significantly, there was an overlap in their perceived historical spheres of influence, which had resulted—across history—in a range of contested areas including Tibet and the west of China, Bhutan, modern-day Bangladesh, the northwest corner of Central Asia and arguably almost all of Southeast Asia (Frankel, 2004, pp. 13–24; Garver, 2001, p. 15). The year 1959 saw Chinese incursions into Ladakh and the North-East Frontier Agency, which were precursors to the India–China War in late 1962 that centred upon territorial disagreements over Tibet, Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh (Guha, 2012, p. 27). Apart from resulting in India's abject defeat within 30 days, and leaving the border issue essentially unresolved, the 1962 War diminished Nehru's hopes of a unified pan-Asian front led by New Delhi and Beijing and left a seemingly indelible psychological scar and deep-seated distrust towards China (Huchet, 2008, p. 51). It also forced India to override its previous mantra that it could prosper in regional and world affairs 'by virtue of its moral example' (Garver, 2004a, p. 9), invoking increased and lasting Indian militarisation.

As a result, India's defence budget grew considerably after the 1962 defeat, as New Delhi was shown the necessity of military security considerations, which would eventually include the acquisition of nuclear weapons in the late 1990s (Perkovich, 2004, pp. 183–184). The fact that China then embarked on creating what would become a long-standing strategic alliance with Pakistan (with whom New Delhi also faced territorial, leadership and status issues in South Asia) only served to double down on such a trajectory and heightened Indian threat perceptions towards China (Ogden, 2014, p. 271). The China–Pakistan relationship would encompass Beijing assisting the Pakistani military and improving Pakistan's defence capabilities, as well as providing diplomatic support concerning the Kashmir dispute (Garver, 2004a, pp. 3, 6, 11). China would also help Pakistan to eventually become a nuclear weapons state by providing the technical information and missiles capable of deploying these weapons (Garver, 2004b, pp. 9–10). In India, it also further embedded a perennial suspicion towards China that would regularly temper the pursuit of even their most common strategic goals by reinforcing a perception in New Delhi that Beijing was carrying out a policy to purposively contain India within South Asia. Periodic armed skirmishes, such as the late 1967 incidents at Nathula and Chaola on the Sikkim–Tibet border and at

Somdurong Chu in 1987, only reiterated such concerns. The legacy of the 1962 War thus entrenched animosity between India and China that arguably would prevent realising a genuine partnership between them (Batabyal, 2006; Huchet, 2008).

Following on from a 'Statement of Friendship' in May 1970, it was only in July 1976 that full diplomatic relations were restored. Slow steps were then taken to stabilise relations, including a joint communiqué in May 1980 designed to avoid further border clashes, and which included the implementation of hotlines, face-to-face commander meetings and prior notification of military exercises. After a meeting between Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Premier Zhao Ziyang in New York in October 1985, the former then visited China in 1988, the first Indian head of state to do so in 34 years. The visit led to the foundation of a Joint Working Group on border and territorial issues, as well as a Joint Economic Group on economic and commercial issues. With the denouement of the Cold War in the late 1980s, and as India undertook a series of reforms to slowly liberalise its economy (in a similar fashion to how China had opened up its economy to global trade from the late 1970s onwards), bilateral relations between New Delhi and Beijing began to improve significantly (Astarita, 2007, p. 550). Mutual modernisation and development goals, as well as a desire for a more stable regional environment, underpinned this fresh positivity and highlighted the shared benefits and gains to be made through cooperation vis-à-vis interactions on the positive side of their double-edged sword-centred relations. These included the 1993 agreement on the 'Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control' (demarcating their 4,000-kilometre-long border). Jiang Zemin's 1996 visit to India (the first by a Chinese head of state since 1962) emboldened this cooperation and led to further measures aimed at reducing border tensions, including the reduction of patrols and the removal of major weapons systems (Ogden, 2014, p. 122).

After a brief downturn in relations following India's nuclear weapons tests of May 1998, during which Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee wrote to then US President Bill Clinton stating that 'we have an overt nuclear weapon state on our border, a state that committed armed aggression against India in 1962' (Vajpayee, 1998), this positive turn in India–China relations continued. In a way, matured by the nuclear tests (which have been accompanied by a series of similar tests by Pakistan), as they removed notions of nuclear ambiguity from New Delhi's strategic posture, further regular mutual state visits led to a deepening of relations in all dimensions. Facilitated by an Indian government under the aegis of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), that did not have any direct political baggage relating to the 1962 War, as well as being much more pragmatic in their foreign policy (see Ogden, 2014), in 1999 a Security Dialogue was initiated. Following a visit by Indian President K. R. Narayanan in May–June 2000, economic, scientific and border negotiations also resumed. Despite occasional tensions (most notably when Vajpayee described China as a 'strategic competitor' in November 2002), these positive relations culminated in the signing of the 2003 'Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation', which forged a consensus on a range of bilateral, regional and global issues and aided both sides' core interests about modernisation, development and great power.

The 'Strategic and Cooperative Partnership Agreement' of 2005 further acknowledged the widening of India–China relations—as well as heightening complexity and therefore the greater potential for tensions—as both sides agreed upon a 'consensus that bilateral relations transcend bilateral issues and have acquired a global and strategic perspective' (Embassy of India, 2009). Underpinning this blossoming of ties and signalling greater levels of economic interdependence, India–China trade rose from $2.9 billion in 2000 to $73.9 billion in 2011, and both sides jointly bided for a number of oil contracts (Ogden, 2014, p. 125), which underscored their mutual quests for ensuring their energy security. Both New Delhi and Beijing also understood that in order to attain legitimacy as great powers, they would need to be recognised as economic powers on both internal and external levels (Rusko & Sasikumar, 2007, p. 117). In turn, and facing similar challenges in Kashmir and Xinjiang, the two initiated a series of military and counterterrorism exchanges, which in 2008 saw Chinese troops active on Indian territory for the first time since 1962. Diplomatically, the 2008 'Shared Vision for the Twenty-First Century' document detailed a joint global economic strategy that included common action in multilateral forums on regional climate change and on civil nuclear energy cooperation, while the two sides helped to establish the BRIC (Brazil–Russia–India–China, later BRICS with the inclusion of South Africa) grouping in 2009 that emphasised shared interests for a more equitable and multipolar world order (Cooper & Farooq, 2016, p. 74). In particular, the mutual aspiration for a multipolar world was regarded as being crucial for securing their sovereignty, as well as balancing together against the US economically and concerning Washington's overt regional influence in Asia. Overall, relations appeared to be in a golden period, with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's stating in 2012 that India–China ties were the 'most important bilateral relationship in the 21st century' (quoted in Ogden, 2014, p. 270).

The Contours of Contemporary Relations

Within the last decade, both India and China have appeared either to fully emerge or on the cusp of being great powers (see Ogden, 2017). As a key dynamic within the foreign policy ambitions of both states, achieving—and indeed restoring—such a status has been a longsought-after aim for both New Delhi and Beijing since the 1940s. Given their ever-greater shares of global economic power, as well as raising military spending, buoyed by having the world's largest populations and being two of the largest states globally in territorial terms, their importance to the international system was and is ever-increasing. Regarding the first of these measures, in 2020, gross domestic product based on purchasing power parity (GDP [PPP]) in constant dollars stood at $24.27 trillion for China and $8.97 trillion for India, the first and third highest globally, representing 18.3% and 6.8% of total world GDP, respectively (World Bank, 2022). In 2020, China spent $252.3 billion and India spent $72.9 billion on military spending, which were the second and third highest amounts, respectively, globally (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2021). As such, India and China are of expanding significance

to other major states in the international system, especially the US whose pre-eminent position appears to be under threat from a rapidly rising China. The US in recent years had redoubled its efforts to try to constrain Chinese power, especially by attempting to use India (as well as more established allies in the shape of Japan and Australia) to actively balance Beijing. In combination, all of these factors—themselves driven by India and China's core domestic aims regarding modernisation and development, which require securing access to more markets and more resources—are creating greater possibilities for both friction and competition in India–China relations across a range of spheres from the economic and military to the regional and systemic.

Economic

At its heart, a strong and globally driven economy 'confers potential wider elements of authority, interdependence and control within the international system but also gives the economically powerful states a system-determining centrality' (Ogden, 2017, p. 72). In the last decade, much expectation has rested upon a natural synergy between China and India with the former acting as the 'workshop of the world' and the latter as the 'back office of the world' (Huchet, 2008, p. 51), which former Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji suggested would be globally irresistible (Pant, 2011, p. 236). As such, Indo-Chinese economic ties have been regarded as one of the central pillars of China–India rapprochement that took place in the 1990s, and which have remained constant despite other areas of conflict between them. Emblematic of such an importance, and despite the prolonged stand-off by their two militaries in eastern Ladakh, culminating in the Galwan skirmish in 2020, intra-India–China trade reached a record $125 billion in 2021, which was a 43.3% increase from 2020 (*The Economic Times*, 2022). Notably, such distinct rises have not typified economic ties since 2011 when their growth has on occasion been less than exponential in nature. The extent of such interdependence is underscored by China being India's largest importer, which dates from 2009. In 2020, as India's top trading partner, China represented 13.8% of all imports ahead of the US (7.6%), United Arab Emirates (6.4%), Saudi Arabia (5.7%) and Iraq (5.0%) (Statista, 2021). India also depended upon Chinese equipment and materials during the COVID-19 pandemic (Patranobis, 2021), with Beijing's greater technological expertise trumping New Delhi's.

Crucially, such an importance is not reciprocated in Indian exports to China, which along with a huge trade deficit between the two sides of $69 billion in 2021 (*The Economic Times*, 2022) has produced a set of largely imbalanced economic relations. Such an imbalance undercuts wider normative claims concerning mutual development and the purported 'win-win' basis of such ties, which currently benefits Beijing more than New Delhi. It also underscores a growing power deferential in their relations, which may be helping China's regional position—and potential hegemony—more than it helps India's. Such concerns have bled into suspicions concerning Chinese investments in India, which have been frequently blocked by elites in New Delhi, especially in the infrastructure and telecom sectors initially due to 'security concerns' and alleged Chinese

espionage (Aiyar, 2007, p. 2015). In 2020, India banned TikTok, WeChat and dozens of other Chinese-made apps, which were regarded as being 'prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order' (India's Ministry of Information Technology quoted in BBC, 2020). In May 2021, Chinese companies were also left out of India's national trials for 5G telecommunications infrastructure (Markey, 2021). As such, mutual economic development aims now appear to be arguably secondary to national security concerns in India's relations with China, while New Delhi additionally remains highly protective of the integrity of its domestic markets and of sharing its raw resources.

Such a stance is also evident in India's refusal to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), under the leadership of China. Forming part of China's wider Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), New Delhi has resisted joining the RCEP due to concerns that the project will go through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which would potentially reduce India's wider claims to the region, and at the same time enhance Pakistan along with the building of roads close to the Indian border which could be used to help militants infiltrate Indian territory. Such sovereignty claims also encompass wider fears that China's presence could strategically block India's ties with Eurasia and even act to counterbalance India's Act East Policy, which would reduce India's regional strategic footprint. Finally, India further sees the building of such infrastructure, including enhancing China's presence in the Pakistani port of Gwadar as part of a 'string of pearls' strategy that is aimed at systematically containing India within South Asia. This latter threat perception also plays into broader regional competition concerning trade and energy security matters in the wider IOR, which are discussed in the section below.

While their economic expansion is bringing deeper tensions that appear to outweigh current benefits, higher trade levels between India and China do signify a level of interdependence which clearly augments their mutual development and modernisation aims. More fundamentally, as two states in the midst of liberalising their economies *en route* to emerging as fully developed entities in global affairs, they are also facing—albeit at potentially different stages—similar fundamental challenges. In these ways, India and China were jointly ranked 80th out of 180 states in Transparency International's 'Corruption Perceptions Index 2019' concerning how corrupt the public sector is seen by businesses and experts (Transparency International, 2019). In turn, both states are suffering from widespread environmental pollution as a result of frequently unfettered and under-regulated economic liberalisation policies. As a result, in 2018, China accounted for 26.5% and India accounted for 6.6% of all CO_2 emissions, the world's first and third highest amounts by states, respectively (Climate Watch, 2021). In 2017, air pollution resulted in 1.6 million deaths in both India and China (Statista, 2018), while in 2020, 46 of the world's 100 most polluted cities were in India and 42 were in China, with 9 of the top 10 being in India (Duggal, 2021). Resolving such issues are thus a mutual concern for both states, and they can learn from each other, as well as collaborate in international regimes (see below). Such interactions temper the more negative side of their double-edged economic ties.

Military

As both sides' economic fortunes have exploded over the last several decades, so too has the rate of military spending on each side, which has frequently been used to augment their respective trade, energy and territorial security requirements. Moreover, from the Indian perspective, China's military modernisation and increasing regional assertiveness are regarded as a direct product of its economic liberalisation and the substantial relative gains that Beijing has acquired versus other states (Pant & Joshi, 2015, p. 68). Given its historically higher rates of economic growth, these relative gains have given China the ability to grow exponentially more than its partners, including India. Furthermore, given their proximity, the mutual pursuit of such interests has led to an almost inevitable overlap of New Delhi and Beijing's strategic goals, creating the possibility for frictions and tensions between them. From the Indian perspective, the legacy of the disastrous 1962 War also continues to permeate its threat perceptions towards China, bolstered by Beijing's continued alliance relationship with Islamabad, whereby at times Pakistan has become a proxy for wider Indo-Chinese military tensions.

From this basis, military ties among the two Asian giants have oscillated between attempts to engender closer—and hence more stabilising relations—and heightening tensions that have increased the possibility of—and even invoked—direct conflict. On the more positive side of their double-edged sword interactions, both New Delhi and Beijing recognise that in the context of consolidating their economic strength, ensuring their internal development and stabilising their political systems, having a peaceful regional and global system is essential (Tellis & Mirski, 2013, p. 5). As such, a state of entrenched enmity is not fundamentally in the best strategic interests of either state. Likewise, invoking a military confrontation would undercut particular Indian claims relating to a moral exceptionalism in diplomacy and statecraft (Sullivan, 2014) and would also discredit the Chinese dogma of a 'peaceful rise' in its ongoing pursuit of great power status (Zhang, 2015, p. 607). Given the centrality of the Chinese economy to the global economy, as well as India's own growing clout in this domain, an all-out conflict would arguably unsettle the entire region and would have far-reaching and damaging political, military and economic effects on both China and India. For these reasons, India–China relations have witnessed periodic phases of military cooperation, as noted above, especially when pertaining to combatting shared counterterrorism threats. Further convergence can be found that concerns maintaining security in their shared neighbourhood, especially regarding cross-border crimes such as drug trafficking and the infiltration of militant groups across their borders (Fang, 2013). There have also been joint exercises on anti-piracy training in order to mitigate against shared trade and energy security threats in the IOR, so as to enhance their continued economic development. Their joint military exercise 'Exercise Hand-in-Hand', initiated in 2007, has seen eight iterations with both sides hosting the event, with the last of these taking place in 2019.

While these sets of interests overlap in a mutually beneficial way, it is in the territorial sphere that their mutually exclusive interests have sparked antagonism. In recent years, this tension has become most prominent concerning India and

China's competing claims to the disputed territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin. Beset by poorly demarcated borders and regular Chinese incursions, these disputes rest upon restoring each sides' territorial integrity. From New Delhi's viewpoint, if Beijing were able to control Arunachal Pradesh, it would extend China's power over the Himalayas and into India's unstable north-eastern states, threatening India's regional hegemony and stability (Gordon, 2014, p. 137), which makes the dispute a greater security threat to India than to China (Fang, 2013, p. 123). These threat perceptions and the innately zero-sum nature of the dispute have recently been exemplified by the Doklam military stand-off in 2017, as well as the deadly clashes in Galwan in 2020, which further underlined an existential element in the mutual threat perceptions of both sides. Evermore vocal nationalist opinions on both sides are also helping to exacerbate tensions, as well as domestic demands for firm—military-backed responses—in the event of any perceived incursions. Given that India's view of China by and large remains one of 'deep distrust' (Scott, 2008, p. 4), further (potentially deadly) military skirmishes are not implausible in the near future. Considering current India–China military imbalances,

> Arunachal Pradesh will remain a pressure point for China to bear down upon whenever it feels the need to 'discipline' India. For India, it will mean a continued, futile attempt to match Chinese military strength in an area where both terrain and logistics make this impossible. (Jha, 2017, p. 170)

In the region more broadly, China's apparent 'string of pearls' strategy to provide potential bases for its military in the IOR has been viewed among Indian elites as a means to limit New Delhi's influence in the South Asian sphere, while undercutting its authority over its smaller neighbours (Zhu, 2011, p. 7). Such concerns link to other areas relating to the RCEP and BRI (as noted above) and are aggravated by India's neighbouring states in South Asia playing 'the China card' by taking advantage of Beijing's largesse to counterbalance India's hegemonic control of the region (YaleGlobal Online, 2018). The interconnection of these factors concerning regional control and regional status effectively intertwines with the two sides' territorial disputes, whereby tensions in one area can often augment tensions in another. On a larger scale, arguments that China is currently focusing its efforts on securing military and economic hegemony within Asia because Chinese officials know that many decades more are needed for China to achieve a superpower status to rival that of the US still hold true. Moreover, they crucially have the counter-effect of limiting New Delhi's own regional hegemony ambitions, which are detrimental to India's own pursuit of great power status. The continued accumulation of ever-enhancing military strength by both sides—including India testing a 'China-centric' Agni V in late 2021 and China developing hypersonic missile capabilities and their mutual development of guided missile destroyers and submarines (Scott, 2021)—further serves to accentuate tensions as well as threat perceptions on both sides. India is also selling missiles to the Philippines and Vietnam, which is affecting China's regional security, while Beijing's developments are spurring on similar US advances. As such, there is a spiralling and

broadening military spending race between the two sides 'as both powers continue their competitive rise in the international system as rival techno-powers, watching and responding to each other' (Scott, 2021).

Systemic

Such a rivalry regarding achieving and maintaining regional hegemony, which is mutually undercut by their unresolved territorial disputes and continuing suspicion of intentions, in many ways serves to undercut the full potential of the Sino-Indian partnership. The fact that these issues are spilling out into India and China's bilateral relations with the smaller states of the Indo-Pacific region also underscores their more negative threat perceptions, especially if they result in further encroachments on each side's perceived 'zone of influence'. Exacerbating such sentiments is China's deep strategic 'all-weather relationship' with Pakistan that seeks to maintain some form of parity in India–Pakistan relations and affects the Kashmir dispute between the two sides whereby Pakistan is not a threat to India without China providing it with military support. China's persuasive role in Indo-Pakistani relations thus highlights a concerted desire by Beijing to inhibit India's hegemonic ambitions in Asia and to entangle New Delhi in a protracted regional conflict against its neighbour. Symbolic of such ties, the Chinese Air Force regularly participates in Pakistan's national day celebrations, despite wider regional tensions (Raghavan, 2019).

In turn, India's intensifying links with the US, as well as with Washington's key partners such as Japan and Australia, are also having a negative effect on India–China ties. Notably, Narendra Modi and the US President Barack Obama met in 2014 and issued a statement declaring that 'we will have a transformative relationship as trusted partners in the 21st century, … our partnership will be a model for the rest of the world' (quoted in Ogden, 2018, p. 10). In 2016, Indian officials noted mutual ties 'rooted in shared values of freedom, democracy, universal human rights, tolerance and pluralism, equal opportunities for all citizens, and rule of law' (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2016b). Markedly, such declarations were regarded as a threat to China's regional and global interests, and as a way for India to contribute to wider international efforts to effectively limit Beijing's influence to the East Asian region. Enhancing this perception, and as part of the wider 'Quad', in 2021 India sent a task force of four warships into the South China Sea on a two-month deployment that included exercises with the US, Japan and Australia. The 2016 'Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement' also significantly upgraded military relations between India and the US. Such a strategic positioning has been accelerating under Prime Minister Modi, whose abandonment of India's traditional non-alignment stance underlines both India's strategic flexibility and its heightening threat perceptions versus China (Malik, 2016, p. 57); it also underlines New Delhi's continued weakness relative to Beijing (Markey, 2021).

More positively, and frequently within the wider international system outside of the Indo-Pacific region, there is, conversely, evidence of a growing strategic

convergence between India and China. Stressing again on the double-edged nature of their relations, and how both sides are capable of simultaneously maximising mutual benefits in some areas even if in other areas of their bilateral ties tensions are being ever worsened, this convergence has significant systemic impacts. Built upon a shared multipolar outlook as two rising but under-represented states, for India and China

> a democratic international order that represents the interests of a variety of states, rather than that of the hegemon, is integrally linked to a more equitable share of the world's resources, recognition of global interdependence for sustainable development, and the mobilization of considerable scientific and technological resources for addressing poverty. (Coning et al., 2015, p. 110)

This outlook provides the basis for working together on mutual issues and interests such as dealing with the climate emergency and the functioning of global finance.

Mixed with such a perspective is the belief that there is a need for New Delhi and Beijing to 'enhance their influence in international institutions, … (and) to establish a discourse representing the interests of developing countries so as to strengthen the legitimacy of their demands' (Cheng, 2015, p. 369). Significantly, 'a desire to create a new international order, and a very strong sense of personal and collective *suffering* under colonial domination' (Miller, 2013, p. 1) critically underpins such ambitions. In these ways, during Modi's 2015 visit to China, both sides noted that their 'simultaneous re-emergence … as two major powers in the region and the world, offers a momentous opportunity for (the) realisation of the Asian Century' (MEA, 2015). Emblematic of these sentiments, India has joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and in 2017 India became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which Modi saw as 'a logical extension of India's age-old ties with the region; … India's engagement … will help us build a region which is an engine of economic growth for the world; (and) is more stable' (MEA, 2016b). India's ties with the SCO involved joint military exercises, most recently in late 2021, even if these occurred around the same time as the Quad's 'Malabar 21' exercises. Such seemingly paradoxical interactions underscore the increasing ability of New Delhi and Beijing to compartmentalise the pursuit of their various strategic interests to particular domains, even if they are seemingly in active competition with each other. Such an observation further highlights the extremely double-edged nature of their relationship.

Conclusion: Navigating Simultaneous Convergence and Divergence

As has been evident across the last 75 years of their international interactions with each other, India–China relations are beset by a complex and ever-evolving melange of interests that across time have converged and diverged. Often doing so simultaneously, and in a way that has been significantly enhanced in the

earliest decades of the twenty-first century as both states' relative share of global economic, military and diplomatic power has been increasing exponentially, such a dynamic appears set to dictate the prevailing nature of relations between New Delhi and Beijing. As this article has shown, such a dynamic underscores the highly double-edged nature of their relations, which are driven by strategic goals that can frequently be regarded as being *concurrently beneficial and threatening*. The mutual assertion of India and China wanting to restore their status of being great powers and the resultant need to augment their global power across a common set of distinct power quotients underpins such a perspective. Moreover, in specific domains relating to positively resolving territorial disputes, achieving undisputed regional hegemony and establishing leadership of the Asian Century, because these strategic goals and interests overlap, India and China appear forced into competition with each other. Past experience and precedent of conflict—most vividly the deadly skirmishes at Galwan in 2020—reinforce such threat perceptions, which are themselves further intensified by significant and continued material power accumulations by both entities.

Finding a way forward that circumvents—and even breaks out of—such simultaneous convergence and divergence appears to be difficult. Arguably both sides appear to have recognised that it is a core feature of India–China relations from the time of the 2005 'Strategic and Cooperative Partnership Agreement' (as noted above) and its assertion that 'bilateral relations transcend bilateral issues'. However, post-Galwan, when India–China relations arguably hit their lowest point since 1962, the dominant Indian official discourse is now that 'there cannot be business as usual' between the two sides unless—and until—China pulls back its soldiers and restores the status quo ante on their disputed border. Underlining this contention, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar stated in early 2022 that 'the state of the border will determine the state of the relationship' (quoted in PTI, 2022). This new emphasis suggests that there is a hierarchy of interests and strategic preferences between the two sides that is capable of fluctuating in relation to specific situations and towards specific audiences. At the moment, border contentions top this hierarchy, a shift that has been intensified by changes across other facets of the India–China relationship, most evidently in material terms whereby Beijing's capabilities are now outstripping New Delhi's. In particular, competition for regional influence has intensified, especially after the commencement of China's BRI, which has led to a loss of traction regarding cooperation between the two sides on big global issues such as climate change, the nature of the global trading system, sovereignty issues and humanitarian interventions, among others. Such an observation also reinforces a sense of waning cooperation between the two giants, thus exacerbating other tensions between them and hence tilting their current relations towards the negative side of the double-edged sword.

In order for peaceful relations to prevail, the key challenge remains to keep the double-edged sword integral to relations between New Delhi and Beijing as well balanced as possible, whereby the negative edge is not allowed to outweigh the positive side. Within the contemporary dynamics of their relations, and given their recent border clashes, doubling down mutual diplomatic efforts to resolve the border

issue would be of clear benefit to the future trajectory of India–China relations. Resurrecting possibilities of Modi realising himself as 'India's Nixon' (Tiezzi, 2014)—a role which was much heralded in 2014 as a means to resolve the border issue and thus cement a strategic partnership with China as partners in the Asian twenty-first century—could have potential in this regard. It would, though, require concessions on both sides that are presently difficult to craft given, often nationalist-fuelled, tensions between the two sides. Wider regional dynamics, most obviously the ongoing all-weather ties between Beijing and Islamabad, and New Delhi's clear—and deepening—strategic recent tilt towards Washington (and Tokyo), would also appear to somewhat mitigate against carving out such a strategic pathway.

More broadly, cultivating self-awareness among leaders from both sides and across their political spectrums is vitally important, as is the need for enhancing cultural exchanges between the two states so as to assuage the deep distrust that evermore permeates both their populations. The avoidance of zero-sum thinking is vital in this regard, and dialogue can be enhanced by both states thinking more about achieving their underlying mutual interests, in a way that does not irrevocably derail them, which could occur through further border clashes. These shared interests are clearest vis-à-vis mutual domestic development and modernisation aims but also the construction of a multipolar world order that would serve to confirm their great power ambitions (Ogden, 2017, pp. 127–129). Again, removing the problem of the border dispute through a pragmatic and mutually acceptable 'grand bargain' could eliminate such a conditioning reality, allowing the rest of their relations to flourish, while positively re-arranging—and hopefully marrying together—the hierarchy of interests and strategic preferences pursued in both states. In this way, seeing India–China relations in a holistic manner, that requires an ever-attentive form of *full-spectrum maintenance* to make them positive-sum in nature, is also required.

In an age of more populist- and nationalist-driven international relations, and with two assertive and self-confident leaders in the guise of Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping, such efforts gain a higher degree of necessity and importance. Enhanced cooperation in all spheres—but particularly the economic and military ones—can also help to create a heightened sense of shared interdependence, understanding and destiny between India and China and will be useful bonds in times of tension and potential conflict. Accepting strategic complexity rather than expecting strategic simplicity, while remembering the critical watchword of modern Indian foreign policy—*pragmatism*—would also be of value. As such, New Delhi can benefit from gaining positive cooperation on say climate change and social governance/corruption, even if it also experiences the negative effects of unbalanced and unequal trade with Beijing. Equally, India–China military cooperation, on cross-border crimes such as drug trafficking or the infiltration of militant groups, can take place, in particular domains, even if China remains the strongest supporter of Pakistan which is seen as the key source of terrorism in India. In a world still beset by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and with new as yet unknown variants threatening the health of both states, along with the increasing chance of an imminent and seismic stock market collapse in the US (Grantham, 2022), accepting such complexity but also appreciating the trust that

can be built by working more cooperatively and positively together will enhance possibilities for stability. It will also ultimately help both India and China to successfully pursue their great power quests and to truly—and collectively—realise the Asian Century.

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