

# India's Relations with China from the Doklam Crisis to the Galwan Tragedy

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## Abstract

No other bilateral relationship for India is as complex and challenging as the one with China. The intractable border dispute is at the root of their rivalry. The military stand-off at Doklam in 2017 had poisoned the bilateral relationship until steps were taken to remove mistrust and misunderstanding through two 'informal' summits between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping in 2018 and 2019. Nonetheless, the sense of general improvement in Sino-Indian ties generated at Wuhan and Mamallapuram was shattered by China's aggressive behaviour in June 2020 at the Galwan Valley in Ladakh along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The article traces key events during the Doklam stand-off and the violent military clashes at Galwan, as well as the steps taken by India to enhance political trust at the highest level. It contends that since there has been no change in China's policies on a range of issues that are critical for India, it is not possible for India to remain ambivalent on how to deal with China. The article concludes that there seems to be greater recognition of the challenge from China and the need to recalibrate the Indian response.

## Keywords

Border dispute, Doklam, Wuhan, Galwan, Ladakh, Kashmir

## Introduction

After independence, both India and China aspired to become major players in international politics. Both shared several common factors, such as being the most populous country with a contiguous territory and ancient civilisations. These similarities led India's first prime minister (PM), Jawaharlal Nehru, to pursue a

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joint leadership with China for the resurgence of Asia. Even when India was reportedly offered a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) by the United States and the Soviet Union as part of the larger Cold War geopolitical dynamics, Nehru was not willing to accept the offer 'at the cost of firm principle' and disturb the Sino-Indian equilibrium (Harder, 2015). The Chinese leadership, however, never expressed its gratitude to Nehru for supporting China at all international forums, including the United Nations (UN).

Despite India's positive gestures towards China, the border dispute remained a central feature of the bilateral relationship, as Nehru was reluctant to offer concessions on the border dispute. Fearing domestic political backlash, Nehru did not agree to Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai's reported offer of a territorial swap—India's acquiescence of China's possession of Aksai Chin in exchange for China's acceptance of the McMahon Line in the east—during the latter's visit to India in 1960 (Dittmer, 2018, p. 205; Joshi, 2018; Small, 2015, p. 22). It is generally believed that the conflict of interests and India's border patrols culminated in the disastrous 1962 war with China. However, China's domestic political factors also played a key role in triggering the war. According to a noted Chinese scholar, Wang Jisi, Mao Zedong's grip on power was considerably weakened after the debacle of the Great Leap Forward. As he found himself relegated to 'the so-called second line' in the leadership hierarchy of the Communist Party of China (CPC), he had a strong incentive to launch the war with India to regain control of the party as its supreme leader (Varma, 2012).

The 1962 border war left deep scars in India's psyche and also set the tone for a troubled relationship between India and China. Many issues divided the two: India's largely sympathetic attitude towards Tibet and hosting of the Dalai Lama; the Cold War geopolitical realignments; China's efforts to challenge India's primacy in South Asia; China's patronage to many ethnic-separatist groups operating in Northeast India, etc. Relations between the two countries remained tense until Atal Bihari Vajpayee, as foreign minister, undertook a visit to Beijing in 1979. However, the outreach was abruptly aborted after China's invasion of Vietnam. After a revival of boundary talks in 1980, hostility along the disputed border staged a comeback in 1986 in Sumdorong Chu. The establishment of a *modus vivendi* with China could not happen until then-PM Rajiv Gandhi toured China in 1988, when he met with Deng Xiaoping to embark on new confidence-building policies.

Since the late 1990s, regular diplomatic meetings and agreements between the two countries provided stability and prevented a breakdown in ties. India and China established a mechanism to discuss the border issue, codified under the Border Peace and Tranquility Agreement of 1993, Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the LAC in 1996, the India–China Expert Group talks, the Special Representative Mechanism of 2003 and the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the Boundary Question in 2005 (Ministry of External Affairs, 2005).

Since becoming the PM in May 2014, Narendra Modi has visited China many times, and the only other country he has visited more than that is the United States. The Chinese President Xi Jinping came to India on a bilateral visit in September 2014. The visit had symbolic importance, as it began in Gujarat, Modi's home

state. PM Modi paid a return visit to China in May 2015 and went to Xian, the home town of President Jinping. However, some critics were quick to point out Modi's lack of resolve in dealing with China, as reflected in Bharat Karnad's assertion that 'the China-assisted infrastructure build-up, a rousing welcome for Modi in Xian, and a hall full of screaming Indians in Shanghai do not compensate for India's strategic reduction' (Karnad, 2015).

The realist theory of international relations stipulates that sudden ascendancy of an emerging power usually prompts its peer competitors and some middle powers to adopt balancing strategies, and they strive to enhance their internal defence capabilities and forge new external security partnerships to hedge against this potential threat. Its alternative would be bandwagoning. Over the past several years, China's rise has upset the balance of power in Asia. Its hard-power diplomacy has had negative implications for its neighbours, deepening their concerns about China's intentions. Beijing's assertive actions in support of its enormous territorial claims have also confronted India with newer challenges.

In the face of a rising China, India has been trying to maintain its strategic autonomy by avoiding a policy of either total balancing or bandwagoning. It has generally adopted ambivalent balancing or hedging. Given the asymmetry of power between India and China, if New Delhi were to embrace wholeheartedly a policy of balancing, it would involve a military alliance to balance China. However, such an outright military alliance with the United States is likely to invite Chinese hostility. On the other hand, bandwagoning would involve allying with China, which is not likely to be appreciated by the majority of Indians who are not keen on forging close ties with China at the expense of the United States. Hence, despite its willingness to balance against China, New Delhi has so far been unwilling to antagonise Beijing. However, India guards against future Chinese dominance by keeping open the option of accelerating the pace of its alignment with the Quadrilateral countries and stepping up its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.

## **Doklam Stand-off**

The stand-off at Doklam was an outcome of India's refusal to be cowed down by China's growing assertiveness. The Doklam plateau is a disputed patch of land near the tri-junction of Bhutan, Tibet and Sikkim. The stand-off started when the Chinese decided to build a road on territory claimed by Bhutan. As India is treaty-bound to help address Bhutan's security concerns as per the terms of a pact renewed in 2007 between the two countries, India sent its troops to the disputed area, preventing China's attempts to seize physical control of the same (Ganguly, 2017). If India had not interfered, China would have extracted territorial concessions from Bhutan. China's actions reinforced the perception that its real intention was to scuttle India's rise (Ganguly, 2018).

The stand-off was one of the most serious confrontations between India and China since the 1962 war, igniting fears of another military clash between the two Himalayan countries. There had been major border clashes in 1967 and 1988

which had prevented the restoration of trust between the two neighbours. In September 1967, the Nathu La fighting, seen by the CIA as ‘military expressions of intensified political relations’, was not allowed to escalate into a major armed conflict (Madan, 2017). The Sikkim clashes that lasted 4 days remained localised, as the Indian Army proved more than a match for the Chinese (Patranobis, 2017). In 1986–1987, the Sumdorong Chu crisis was another moment when war seemed imminent as Indian and Chinese troops faced one another eyeball-to-eyeball. Several geopolitical and military factors led to de-escalation of the crisis, including India’s demonstration of its strength and resolve to defend the status quo on the disputed border. When both sides withdrew their troops, it ended the possibility of an immediate conflict (Pardesi, 2019).

China backed down in Doklam, but its statement that ‘China will continue fulfilling its sovereign rights to safeguard territorial sovereignty in compliance with the stipulations of the border-related historical treaty’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, 2017) indicated no changed in Beijing’s position on the border tri-junction. It is generally believed that Nepal, Bhutan and some parts of Tibet work as traditional ‘buffer zones’ between India and China, preventing direct interactions between them (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, p. 159). However, China has been increasing its presence in these areas. Nepal has also welcomed enhanced connectivity with China, and the current government in Kathmandu has been openly critical of Indian policies.

After Doklam, the possibility remained wide open of the Chinese army intruding into areas where the Indian army was at a relatively disadvantageous position. India’s former army chief and the first Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), General Bipin Rawat, cautioned against complacency, because Doklam-style stand-offs may ‘increase in the future’ (Dutta, 2017). Viewing the flare up of Sino-Indian border tensions in Doklam as a manifestation of new Chinese audacity, Bharat Karnad warned that ‘Doklam was just a foretaste of territorial aggrandisement to come if India does not wake up’ (Karnad, 2019). Unfortunately, these apprehensions became true in June 2020.

The disengagement in Doklam enabled Modi to travel to Xiamen in China for the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit in September 2017, and China named the Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba in the summit declaration’s section on terrorism. Another sign of India’s efforts to reduce the tensions with China after the Doklam stand-off was the Indian foreign secretary’s note to the cabinet secretary that senior leaders from the Indian government must not attend a public event organised by Tibetan leaders to show their appreciation for India for hosting them for nearly 50 years. Around that time, India also informed China that it would not intervene in the Maldives and expected China to reciprocate this measure by not crossing certain ‘lines of legitimacy’ (Malhotra, 2018).

## **Wuhan Summit**

On 21 April 2018, India’s then External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj, arrived in China to meet China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi and participate in the Shanghai

Cooperation Organisation (SCO) foreign ministers' meeting. In the last week of April 2018, an 'informal summit' was held between Modi and Xi Jinping at Wuhan in China. Although no joint statement was signed between Modi and Jinping, India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) released a press statement on 28 April stating that Xi Jinping and Modi had 'agreed that proper management of the bilateral relationship will be conducive for the development and prosperity of the region, and will create the conditions for the Asian Century'. India's foreign secretary was reported to have said that 'Xi Jinping actually said that he has seen a number of Indian films, both Bollywood and regional, and that it would be a good idea to expand this and more Indian film should come to China and more Chinese film should go to India' (Roche & Ghadyalpatil, 2018).

Analysing the reasons behind the Wuhan summit, India's former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to China Nirupama Rao observed that conflict between the two Asian giants 'takes away from the prospects of the Asian century that their leaders speak of. Perhaps it is this realisation that prompted the rendezvous in Wuhan' (Rao, 2018). A Chinese scholar, Long Xingchun, director of the Center for Indian Studies at China West Normal University, argued that Modi's refrain from making adverse remarks against China during the Doklam standoff allowed the top leadership to take steps toward de-escalation and hold informal summit. (Xingchun, 2019). Another Chinese scholar, Liu Zongyi, a senior fellow of Shanghai Institute for International Studies, appreciated Modi for striving to improve bilateral relations but also felt that putting the consensus reached at the Wuhan meeting into practice would be a challenge for the Indian PM due to the 'stereotypical mindsets' and 'Cold War mentality' of India's strategic elites (Zongyi, 2018). After the Wuhan summit, India and China stepped up efforts to improve ties on different spheres, including military-to-military ties. India participated in the August 2018 SCO joint military exercise involving Chinese and Pakistani troops. The 7th India–China joint Hand-in-Hand joint training exercises were held in China's Chengdu in December 2018 (PTI, 2018). In their first bilateral meeting in 2019 on the sidelines of the SCO summit at Bishkek in June, Modi told Jinping that there had been 'a new momentum and stability' in India–China relations as a result of an improvement in the strategic communication between the two sides, and this would make them 'more sensitive towards each other's concerns and interests' (PTI, 2019).

In the midst of heightened tensions between India and Pakistan due to the Pulwama terror attack in February 2019 and India's retaliatory air strikes at Pakistan's Balakot, New Delhi proposed to designate JeM chief Masood Azhar as a global terrorist in March 2019. China was the only country in the UNSC to oppose the move, claiming that there were some procedural issues that should be resolved before it could support such a move. However, it soon became untenable for China to continuously withstand growing international pressure on Azhar's listing as a global terrorist as the United States threw its diplomatic weight behind India. Eventually, China removed its decade-long 'hold' on Azhar's designation as a global terrorist by the UN Sanctions Committee on 1 May 2019 (Raj, 2019; Zheng, 2019). However, this concession to India by China did not alter the basic dynamics of its bilateral relations with either India or Pakistan.

## Change in Jammu and Kashmir's Status

In August 2019, following parliamentary and presidential approval, the Modi government abrogated Article 370 and Article 35A of the Indian constitution that gave Jammu and Kashmir special rights in the Indian Union. The move included splitting the state into two entities and also making Ladakh, the eastern part of the state, a separate 'Union Territory' to be administered directly from New Delhi (Press Information Bureau, 2019).

Besides its huge domestic implications, the move had potential international ramifications. In order to internationalise the issue, the Pakistani foreign minister immediately went to Beijing to seek China's support. A Chinese spokesperson criticised India's move on Ladakh, stating that it 'challenged China's sovereign interests'. The Modi government did not waste time in reminding China that 'India does not comment on the internal affairs of other countries and similarly expects other countries to do likewise' (Chaudhury, 2019b). India's Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar visited Beijing on 12 August. The main official purpose of his visit was to take part in the second meeting of the High Level Mechanism on Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges; however, he also discussed with his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, issues pertaining to the second informal summit between Modi and Jinping to be held in October 2019 in India (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019a). Although Jaishankar's China visit was scheduled much before India's move to revoke Article 370, he nonetheless took this opportunity to clarify India's position on Jammu and Kashmir persuasively. According to a report published in the *Xinhua*, Wang stated China's position on Kashmir and hoped that India would 'play a constructive role in regional peace and stability', while Jaishankar noted that India was 'willing to exercise restraint and improve relations with Pakistan' (*Xinhua*, 2019). On the other hand, the MEA statement on the meeting noted that when the Chinese foreign minister brought up the issue of legislative changes regarding Jammu and Kashmir with his Indian counterpart, the latter 'conveyed that this was an internal matter for India' and this would have 'no implication for either the external boundaries of India or the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China. India was not raising any additional territorial claims' (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019a). Despite its willingness to maintain the 'Wuhan Spirit' amid multiple uncertainties at the domestic and international fronts, India signalled that it would not submit to China's unreasonable behaviour.

The abrogation of Article 370 created a new bone of contention between India and China. Beijing helped Pakistani efforts in internationalising the Kashmir issue by seeking the intervention of the UNSC on India's move to revise the constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir. However, the China–Pakistan joint efforts could not succeed, as most of the UNSC members, in a meeting held on 16 August, felt that there was no need to have any statement or outcome after the consultations (*News18*, 2019). China made another attempt at the UN to internationalise the issue of Kashmir in January 2020 but failed again, as the 14 other members of the UNSC felt that the matter did not require any discussion (Mohan, 2020). Insisting that Kashmir is a bilateral matter between India and Pakistan, the MEA asked China to 'reflect on a global consensus on Kashmir and avoid raising it at the



United Nations' (Associated Press, 2020). Replying to a question on why China raises the Kashmir issue at the UNSC, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, Geng Shuang, said that China's position on Kashmir is 'consistent and clear' and 'if the Indian side interprets it in other way, that will be a wrong interpretation' (PTI, 2020a).

It is worth pointing out that China controls the Shaksgam Valley of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), ceded by Pakistan to China as per the 1963 boundary agreement that India does not recognise. This agreement had paved the way for the construction of Karakoram Highway jointly by China and Pakistan. Aksai Chin has been under Chinese occupation since the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Its importance lies in the fact that it connects Xinjiang and Tibet, both of which are under the jurisdiction of China's Western Theater Command (WTC), which is the largest theatre with a complex terrain (McCauley, 2017). While the Shaksgam Valley itself may not be an immediate threat to India's interests in Ladakh, the growing operational connectivity in Tibet and Xinjiang could be used during military operations against Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Thus, with Ladakh now a union territory and many Indian ministers raising the nationalist pitch by vowing to take back PoK, as well as Aksai Chin, it was apprehended that Beijing could harden its position on the border dispute (Bhaumik, 2019).

## Chennai Connect

Against this geostrategic background of slow momentum, continuing frictions and disillusionment with the Wuhan spirit, India did not give up its efforts to improve its bilateral relationship with China. This commitment was reflected in the second informal summit at Mamallapuram in October 2019, which added the 'Chennai Connect' to the 'Wuhan Spirit' (*The Hindu*, 2019). It was also decided to hold 70 activities to celebrate 70 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries, with 2020 being designated as the 'Year of Indian-China Cultural and People to People Exchanges' (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019b). However, it would be going too far to argue that New Delhi's unease about China's strategic foray into South Asia and economic penetration in India disappeared with this summit. The primary motivation behind both the informal summits was to allow for direct communication between Modi and Jinping so as to minimise the zone of divergence while providing strategic guidance to the respective bureaucracies. However, India's approach towards China did not undergo a major change, since the element of strategic competition remained dominant due to India's threat perception of China (Madan, 2020) and Beijing's lack of interest in addressing Indian concerns (Pant, 2019). According to Liu Zongyi, China was magnanimous enough not to cancel the Mamallapuram summit 'despite India violating China's territorial sovereignty' by making Ladakh a union territory. Zongyi interpreted this stance as 'China's respect for India's great power status' but believed that New Delhi does not reciprocate, as 'India's diplomacy with China has become more aggressive', with India trying to take advantage of the US-China trade war to achieve its diplomatic agenda (Zongyi, 2019). Following the Mamallapuram

Summit, President Jinping went to Nepal for a 2-day visit. Although it was a formal state visit, it is interesting to note that it was also the first Nepal visit by a Chinese president in 23 years (*The Hindu*, 2019). Signing a feasibility study agreement for a 70 km rail link connecting Kathmandu and Shigatse in Tibet where it would join an existing railway line to Lhasa, China promised to ‘help Nepal realise its dream of becoming a land-linked country from a land-locked one’ (Walden, 2019).

Although growing economic interdependence has served to prevent war between the two neighbours, there is however fundamental disparity in the economic relationship. China was the top trading partner of India from 2013–2014 to 2017–2018; only in 2018–2019 did the United States surpass China to become India’s top trading partner. India’s trade deficit with China stands at USD 53.56 billion, which is more than a third of the country’s total trade deficit (PTI, 2020b). New Delhi’s exports to China are mainly composed of natural resources and raw materials, whereas Beijing’s exports to India are primarily manufactured and value-added products (Sen, 2019). India pulled out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations in late 2019 due to concerns that the deal would serve to flood the domestic market with Chinese imports without a concomitant rise in exports, thus negatively affecting domestic manufacturers and hampering the growth of the Indian economy (*Japan Times*, 2019).

The Sino-Indian engagement post Wuhan was just the continuation of the ‘leadership-centric’ dynamic in bilateral relations, whereby meetings between top leaders eased out prevailing tensions, albeit temporarily. However, the limits to personal diplomacy translating into real benefits were manifested at the Galwan Valley.

## The Galwan Valley Incident

Since May 2020, alarming reports appeared of China’s surprise and audacious entrenchment in Pangong Tso, Hot Springs, Galwan Valley and Depsang Plains, places accepted as Indian territory for decades. The violent clashes between Indian and Chinese soldiers on 15 June 2020 at the Galwan Valley in Ladakh represents the most significant military escalation in border tensions in almost half a century. During the brutal skirmish, 20 Indian soldiers died, while Chinese casualties remain unclear. China is reported to have occupied several small tracts of territory near the LAC where the Indian union territory of Ladakh borders Tibet. The incident has sparked widespread public outrage in India even as there appears to be a significant shift in the attitude of India’s political elite towards China. By forcibly seizing territory and killing Indian soldiers, China has crossed two important Indian red lines (Altman, 2020).

It is a well-known fact that the post-1988 framework of the India–China relationship has rested on the recognition that despite boundary disputes, peace along the contested borders should be maintained by both sides. Talks on dispute resolution could continue, but India and China had to step up efforts to deepen ties in other spheres. Unfortunately, this framework could last only three decades.



India is clear about its perception of LAC, but its repeated requests to China to clarify its own perception of LAC have failed simply because it would deny China the opportunity to keep on shifting the goalposts and forcibly creating *fait accompli* on the ground. China's recent claim that it "does not recognize the so-called Union Territory of Ladakh illegally established by India, and opposes infrastructure construction in disputed border areas for military control purposes," is a clear manifestation of this mentality (Banakar, 2020).

Many potential explanations have been offered about China's aggressive stance. India has almost completed a strategic road known as the Darbuk–Shyok–Daulat Beg Oldie (DSDBO), which is an all-weather road stretching more than 250 km that would dramatically improve travel time between Leh and Daulat Beg Oldie. A feeder road from DSDBO towards the Galwan Valley was likely interpreted by China as a potential 'back door' in Aksai Chin. China's decision to occupy parts of Galwan Valley may be aimed at limiting any tactical gain India might receive from improved border infrastructure (Altman, 2020). China has also been under attack for concealing the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through targeted influence operations, China has been trying to shift the focus away from its alleged delay in informing the world about the pandemic. China's military assertion along the LAC is seen as a strong warning that India's attempts to emerge as a counterbalance to China will have adverse consequences. Another reason behind China's many policy miscalculations is widely believed to be the over-concentration of power in the hands of Xi Jinping (Pei, 2020). Another important reason pertains to the revocation of Article 370, which has been discussed earlier. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, India's move has brought Aksai Chin into sharp focus, and this may have rattled China. Beijing's opposition to the transformation of Ladakh's legal status could have set the stage for China's militaristic display at the LAC (Tellis, 2020).

Despite talks of disengagement, the road to normalcy remains difficult. Post the Galwan clash, India's ties with China are likely to change forever, even though both sides are trying to restore confidence.

## India's Response

While the Western countries have been in a state of disarray in responding to China's diplomatic and military assertiveness, India has thus far tried to pursue a policy of engaging China at every level while simultaneously remaining on alert in dealing with China's rising assertiveness. China's economic and security overtures to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka confirm India's apprehensions of China's strategy of encirclement of India. Some prominent Chinese scholars advise the Indian leadership to 'accept the emerging geopolitical reality that it will no longer be able to dominate its neighborhood, and give up on having a "sphere of influence" in Southern Asia independent of China' (Xiaoping, 2018).

Although China has not declared any formal military alliance with Pakistan against India, New Delhi has been apprehensive of a two-pronged attack by China

and Pakistan along its northern border. One of the major reasons for India's apprehensions stems from China's grand project in Pakistan, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is the flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India remains sceptical of the CPEC as it traverses territory in Kashmir, and its resistance to the BRI is based on the fact that the controversial project is pushing many South Asian countries into unsustainable debt burdens. Although the intractable boundary dispute and China–Pakistan nexus, as well as fears of strategic encirclement, have been important factors dictating Indian perspectives towards China, Beijing's growing inroads into the subcontinent have further fuelled these fears. Because of these factors, India has paid particular attention to deepening the bonds of friendship with smaller neighbours by catering to their economic and infrastructural requirements.

Once a strategic backwater, the Indian Ocean is becoming an arena for strategic competition between India and China. Besides its burgeoning naval capabilities, China's port development activities in regions adjacent to India have led to concerns in New Delhi that these ports could provide refuelling facilities for not just tankers but also warships, allowing the expansion of Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean (Bateman et al., 2017). New Delhi has therefore taken a serious view of China's maritime assertiveness. Consequently, New Delhi's bilateral and multilateral defence cooperation with regional actors such as Japan, Australia, Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam has increased in unprecedented ways. India's 'Look East Policy' has been upgraded to 'Act East Policy', whose main aim is to improve infrastructure connectivity in the Greater Mekong Subregion—Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand (Bana & Yhome, 2017).

Around China's periphery, many countries that perceive a threat from China are clearly looking to India to correct the power imbalance. Many analysts are treating India's enhanced engagements with states in the region as a counterbalance to China's power aspirations (Reuters, 2018; Singh, 2018). In an op-ed published in 27 newspapers in all ASEAN countries on 26 January 2018, PM Modi stated that ASEAN–India relations are 'free from contests and claims' and believe in 'sovereign equality of all nations irrespective of size' (*Indian Express*, 2018). This assertion could well be interpreted as an indirect reference to China's contested territorial claims in the South China Sea.

India's geostrategic significance in the Indian Ocean, with a powerful navy along with contemporary geopolitical dynamics, leaves no option for Washington but to co-opt New Delhi as America's preferred strategic partner. In a significant departure from India's traditional policy of not entering into a military agreement with any major power, the Modi government has made India's strategic preference in favour of the United States comparatively clear by signing the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016 and the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018. Alongside these developments, the term 'Indo-Pacific region' has now replaced the term 'Asia-Pacific region' in the foreign policy lexicon of India, the United States, Japan and Australia. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad, among India, the United States, Japan and Australia, which had ceased after Chinese protests a decade earlier, made a comeback after a decade on the sidelines of the 2017 ASEAN

Summit. A month before the parliamentary elections in May 2019, the Modi government opened a new 'Indo-Pacific division' in India's external affairs ministry.

In a significant development, the Quad met in New York in late September 2019 on the sidelines of the United National General Assembly. The elevation of the discussion—the earlier ones were at the joint-secretary level—suggests the strengthening of the informal framework to an institutionalised front on regional security issues, including China's increasing economic influence, military power and diplomatic footprint in the Indo-Pacific (Scott & Reynolds, 2019). More recently, following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Quad cooperation has extended to a 'Quad-Plus' engagement with the involvement of three other Indo-Pacific powers—New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam. India's endorsement of this process indicates New Delhi's 'growing embrace of an American worldview that aims to defend and strengthen a liberal international order while focusing on building an Indo-Pacific narrative that has been threatened by the rise of a "revisionist" China' (Panda, 2020). The military stand-off at the Galwan Valley is likely to push India further along this path.

Till the military stand-off at Ladakh in May 2020, New Delhi was keen to preserve the 'Wuhan consensus' with China, with the expectation that Beijing would gradually come to respect India's sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean in the same way that India respects China's in the South China Sea. New Delhi showed some ambivalence towards Beijing that combined elements of balancing and accommodation. Some actions by the Modi government were indicative of India's attempts to reverse the downturn in its ties with China. In June 2018, at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Modi said that 'India does not see the Indo-Pacific Region as a strategy or as a club of limited members. Nor as a grouping that seeks to dominate'. In November 2018, at the G20 summit in Buenos Aires, Modi demonstrated diplomatic finesse. The media coverage focused primarily on his first-ever trilateral with Trump and Abe, but the gathering also featured another Indian 'first'—a trilateral with Jinping and Putin (Trivedi, 2019). During US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to New Delhi in June 2019, India's new External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar was cautious when he said that 'the Indo-Pacific is for something, not against somebody. And that something is peace, security, stability, prosperity and rules' (Chaudhury, 2019a).

India's cautious attitude led many Chinese scholars to conclude that India was interested neither in the American vision for the Indo-Pacific region nor on joining the Quad. As argued by Ling Shengli, who is secretary-general of the International Security Study Center at China Foreign Affairs University, India is keen to make the Indo-Pacific region open and inclusive, as it is not interested in 'a confrontation with China. It prefers an Indo-Pacific Strategy that puts emphasis on both security and economy rather than one simply targeting China' (Shengli, 2019). Hu Shisheng, director of the Institute of South and Southeast Asian and Oceania Studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, at Peking University, believed that since 'India does not have enough strength to compete with China alone', it may be tempted to get aligned with the American strategy of containing China, but that would not be easy, because there are many constraints on India, which 'lacks adequate national power and thus does not want to irritate

China beyond a point' (Shisheng, 2020). Yang Xiyu, a researcher at the China Institute of International Studies, also contended that India's efforts were aimed more at 'its eastward engagement' through the 'Look East' and 'Act East' policies rather than the imperatives of the US-proposed Indo-Pacific strategy, further arguing that 'as a major developing country, India has long upheld its independence and non-alignment, and has become increasingly reluctant to tie itself to other powers' geopolitical strategies' (Xiyu, 2020). However, this ambivalent stance seems to be changing since the Galwan tragedy, as China's infrastructure enhancements in Tibet have made India vulnerable to fait accompli strategies in the Himalayas. Xi Jinping has been conducting an increasingly expansionist foreign policy, drawing on the enormous resources of a country at the height of its power. Even though India is frequently confronted by harsh economic realities, there are early indications of New Delhi's willingness to revisit and reconstruct its approach towards China. Several Chinese-controlled infrastructure projects in India have been revoked or cancelled. Around 60 Chinese apps have been banned (Sunil & Beniwal, 2020). Efforts are underway to deepen ties with the United States. Welcoming India's decision to ban Chinese apps, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, 'We welcome India's ban on certain mobile apps that can serve as appendages of CCP's surveillance state. India's clean app approach will boost India's sovereignty, will also boost India's integrity and national security, as the Indian government itself has stated' (IANS, 2020).

There are increased demands for India to deepen its engagement with Taiwan, as it sits well with India's strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific region. Enhanced cooperation with Taiwan offers many opportunities in key sectors in the Indian economy, which could reduce India's excessive dependence on China and help in diversifying global supply chains (Parthasarathy, 2020). Similarly, India could shift its traditional stance on Hong Kong, which has been witnessing anti-Beijing protests for quite some time. The enactment, on 30 June 2020, of a stringent security law has effectively ended the 'one country, two systems' model prevalent since 1997. Despite India's deference to China's sensitivities, Beijing has frequently raised the issue of Kashmir at international forums, and this may have prompted India to hint at a change in its policy. At a meeting in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva on 1 July 2020, India said that it was keeping 'a close watch on recent developments' in Hong Kong, given the presence of a large Indian community there. Without naming China, India's permanent representative to UN in Geneva expressed the hope that 'the relevant parties will take into account these views and address them properly, seriously and objectively' (ANI, 2020).

India has reportedly agreed to involve Australia in India's annual naval exercises with the United States and Japan, and this marks the end of India's slow adaptation to a rapidly changing maritime environment in the Indo-Pacific littoral (Dziedzic & Oaten, 2020). Australia last participated in what was originally an Indo-US bilateral naval exercise in 2007, but India subsequently blamed Australia for the collapse of the first iteration of the Quad in 2008 (Medcalf, 2008). By inviting Australia, India has hopefully shed its long-held defensiveness on choosing its security partners in the maritime domain. On 4 June 2020, in a 'virtual' summit between PM Modi and his Australian counterpart, Scott Morrison,

the two countries signed a mutual logistical support agreement, allowing the militaries of the two countries to use each other's military bases for repair and replenishment. As rightly pointed out, India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Australia's Cocos Islands are strategically positioned to allow both nations to maintain significant maritime awareness in the major chokepoints in the eastern side of the Indian Ocean (Baruah, 2020).

## Conclusion

The long-standing border dispute between India and China remains intractable, as no mutually acceptable solution seems possible at the moment. During PM Narendra Modi's first tenure, India tried to maintain a balance between the cooperation and competition dynamics. After a period of tense relations since the Doklam military stand-off in 2017, ties between India and China evidently warmed up following the informal summit between Modi and Xi Jinping in Wuhan, China, in April 2018. This was driven by a hope in New Delhi that frequent engagement between the two leaders would reduce the competitive elements and incline the two countries towards a cooperative relationship. The commitment to improved ties was also reflected in the second informal summit at Mamallapuram in October 2019, which was a follow-up to the Wuhan summit. Considering the tumultuous relations between the two countries and the shifting geostrategic dynamics, there are no easy answers to the problems India is going to face in its complex ties with China. China would not move away from Pakistan, as strategic and economic considerations weigh heavily on Beijing's mind, particularly in view of various CPEC projects currently underway in Pakistan. Moreover, due to China's rising ambitions and increasing capabilities, as well as the influence it is developing in many states of the South Asian littoral, the Indian Ocean has become an increasingly contested geostrategic space. To cope with this structural challenge, India has undertaken multi-pronged measures for enhancing its security. New Delhi had been gradually inching closer to the United States and its allies, but as China makes consistent incursions into India's territory, India's innate strategic urge to remain non-aligned with major power blocs seems to be getting eroded.

Despite some convergences, the Sino-Indian ties are likely to remain fundamentally adversarial for reasons that go beyond the border dispute. The constant talk of the 'Wuhan spirit' and 'Chennai connect' after the Doklam crisis could not save the bilateral ties from spiralling out of control. Thus, India should take the current recalibration of its ties with China to its logical conclusion by taking appropriate economic and geopolitical measures to narrow the power differential with China. Beijing's growing economic and military power has resulted in drastic changes in the regional configuration of power, which must prompt India to change tack, since Beijing's recent actions have taken the bilateral ties back by at least half a century. The road from Doklam to Galwan has been very bumpy in India-China relations, and the tragic death of 20 Indian soldiers has exposed the real nature of Chinese expansionism.

India can make some tactical compromises with China, but forging strategic convergence will be extremely difficult now. However, New Delhi's quest for diplomatic equilibrium, along with its hopes for a peaceful settlement of disputes with China, is undoubtedly driven by an ambition, first and foremost, to maintain India's power and prestige. As India redefines its priorities vis-à-vis China, its policymakers will have to be bolder in articulating their need for robust partnerships, including that with the United States.

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