

CHINA'S MILITARY DECISION-MAKING IN TIMES OF CRISIS AND CONFLICT



Edited by Roy D. Kamphausen

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With contributions from

Drew T. Holliday, David C. Logan, Shuxian Luo, Jagannath Panda, David Santoro,
Phillip C. Saunders, Adam Segal, Balazs Szanto, and Zi Yang

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— FOREWORD —

I am privileged to present *China's Military Decision-making in Times of Crisis and Conflict*, a superb set of papers that draws from the proceedings of the 2022 People's Liberation Army (PLA) Conference cohosted by the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), the China Strategic Focus Group at U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, and the Department of Foreign Languages at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

The military capabilities of the People's Republic of China (PRC) have expanded exponentially over the past two decades, and its leaders have demonstrated an increasing appetite to use these capabilities as coercive tools against the United States and its maritime neighbors in the western Pacific. Much has been written about the tactical and operational consequences of these developments. Understudied, however, is China's crisis response decision-making and behavior. This volume addresses this critical knowledge gap.

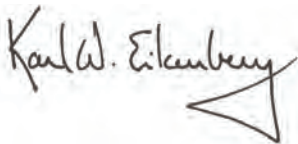
There are three potential triggers of a crisis between Washington and Beijing that might include military forces and lead to dangerous escalation. First, the armed forces of the United States and its allies and partners routinely operate in close proximity to those of the PLA Navy and Air Force with the ever-present possibility of an accident exciting nationalistic sentiments. Second, both sides conduct robust operations in space and cyberspace, including with uncrewed and unmanned vehicles. This creates important domains and modes of warfare for which there are inadequate agreed-to rules of the road and increases the likelihood of one side misperceiving the intention of the opposite side. The third potential trigger is the possibility that President Xi Jinping might decide to employ the PLA preemptively to realize goals associated with his vision of "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," including actions to achieve control of the South China Sea or, even more worrisome, efforts to assert PRC sovereignty over Taiwan.

Chinese and U.S. civilian and military leaders, of course, understand that it is better to anticipate the inevitability of a bilateral crisis and put into place and practice communications protocols designed to contain and de-escalate before an unexpected day of reckoning. But for reasons brilliantly explained in this volume, efforts to do so have largely failed up to this point.

Thus, in the absence of substantive official Sino-U.S. dialogue on crisis avoidance and crisis management, one of the many merits of *China's Military Decision-making in Times of Crisis and Conflict* is the contributing authors' use of historical case studies, empirical evidence, and inductive reasoning, often grounded in primary PRC sources, to make persuasive arguments about how Beijing might approach and act at a time when the stakes verge on existential.

Although, as mentioned, this superb compendium of papers authored by some of the best global analysts of PRC security and military strategy draws from the 2022 PLA Conference, its implications are intragovernmental, international, and academic in nature. I highly commend this volume to an eclectic group of readers, including those in the U.S. Departments of State and Defense, Armed Forces, and intelligence agencies; academics, students, and media analysts trying to better understand Chinese crisis management doctrine; and international officials and academics focused on PRC foreign policy goals and Beijing's relevant playbooks.

Showing my experience (or age), I first traveled to the then Republic of China—now in official parlance Taiwan—in 1971 while a member of the U.S. Military Academy Chinese Language Club. In my opinion, *China's Military Decision-making in Times of Crisis and Conflict* is one of the most insightful and useful policy-relevant publications written over the five decades since that very different time and era.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karl W. Eikenberry". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized flourish at the end of the name.

Karl Eikenberry
Former U.S. Ambassador and Lieutenant General, retired, U.S. Army
September 2023

China's Decision-making and the Border Dispute with India

Jagannath Panda

The conflict between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and India along their disputed border, the Line of Actual Control (LAC), has not completely de-escalated in the three years since the Galwan Valley clash of May 2020. After more than eighteen rounds of talks and negotiations with top military officials from both sides, any collaboration remains marked by deep mistrust. While the disengagement process has remained stalled, reports suggest that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has not completely withdrawn from its forward location in the Kongka La region in eastern Ladakh, and problems with patrols in Depsang and Demchok have not yet been fully resolved.¹ A step toward ending the standoff was made when both India and China successfully withdrew from Patrolling Point 15 in the Gogra-Hotsprings region of eastern Ladakh; yet, complete disengagement is still far from being achieved.² Moreover, the new skirmish along the mountainous border in the Tawang region of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh has further highlighted that the LAC remains highly sensitive and dangerous three years after the Galwan Valley skirmishes.

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¹ Shishir Gupta, "Two Years after Galwan, De-escalation Still to Take Place on Ladakh LAC," *Hindustan Times*, May 5, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/two-years-after-galwan-de-escalation-still-to-take-place-on-ladakh-lac-101651719113285.html>.

² Dinakar Peri, "India, China Troops Disengage at LAC Friction Point in Ladakh," *Hindu*, September 8, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-china-begin-disengagement-in-gogra-hotsprings-pp-15-in-eastern-ladakh/article65866319.ece>.

What factors have prevented the PRC and India from moving past the stalemate over the LAC and reaching a sustainable solution to the border conflict? Looking at the PRC's decision-making process and outlook toward India (and the region at large), what are the prospects for successful negotiations between the two countries moving forward?

To answer these questions, it is imperative to understand the trajectory of both the China-India border confrontation and, broadly, their "developmental partnership." This requires an examination of how the PRC perceives the issue within the Chinese government's decision-making calculus on the matter.³ In other words, it is worth looking at the factors, particularly through the strategic lens of China, that led to a relatively sudden escalation of tensions between the two countries, so much so that it resulted in the deadliest clash between the two sides in over four decades. Although no guns were used—per the 1996 and 2005 agreements that disallowed the use of firearms (including "blast operations" or explosives) within two kilometers of the LAC—primitive weaponry like nail-studded iron rods was used to bloody effect.⁴ The Chinese side had admitted to injuries and casualties amid a "physical clash" between troops without mentioning crude weapons.⁵ Even three years after the incident, there is little clarity on the fundamental causes that led to the sudden escalation after years of stability at the border.

China's actions at borders disputed with its neighbors—including its Galwan Valley clash with India in 2020 and its buildup of infrastructure in contentious areas near the LAC—are widely interpreted as unilateral acts of aggression. Looking at China's domestic debates and its decision-making processes can help gain critical insight into Chinese perceptions on the issue and, therefore, help project the future of the boundary crisis.

³ "Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), May 20, 2015, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2711_663426/2712_663428/201505/t20150520_511931.html; and "Joint Statement between the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China on Building a Closer Developmental Partnership," Prime Minister's Office (India), September 19, 2014, https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/joint-statement-between-the-republic-of-india-and-the-peoples-republic-of-china-on-building-a-closer-developmental-partnership,

⁴ "Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas," UN Peacemaker, November 29, 1996, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CN%20IN_961129_Agreement%20between%20China%20and%20India.pdf; and "Galwan Valley: Image Appears to Show Nail-Studded Rods Used in India-China Brawl," BBC News, June 18, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53089037>.

⁵ Liu Xuanzun and Liu Xin, "China Urges India to Restrain," *Global Times*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1191837.shtml>.

Against this backdrop, this chapter attempts to demystify the PRC's decision-making around the boundary conflict with India. It first outlines how India has factored into China's calculus, with a focus on Xi Jinping's consolidation of power through the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Central Military Commission (CMC). It then examines the executive role of the PLA under Xi and analyzes the recent shift in China's policy toward India. Finally, the chapter considers the prospects of achieving realistic progress in border negotiations.

China's Decision-making and the Sino-Indian Border Dispute

The CCP today, as in previous decades, considers the armed forces critical and integral to its survival. It holds absolute power over the PLA, not just in spirit but to the letter. Thus, the modernization and strengthening of the PLA as per "Xi Jinping Thought" are under the party's command. One aim of the CCP constitution is to develop the PLA so as to enhance its loyalty to the party. Thus, the PLA, as a party-armed wing comprising soldiers that are also party members, is a "political actor" that influences state governance. As general secretary of the CCP for the past decade and chair of the CMC, Xi Jinping has held the top position in China's decision-making infrastructure. To maintain and strengthen the CCP's ability to dominate policymaking and enhance his authority over China's policy agenda, Xi has augmented his influence and rigorously centralized decision-making power across all policy sectors, especially in the military dimension.

Xi's Boundary-Plus Policy

The disputed China-India boundary is critical in Xi's decision-making calculus, especially as India's own regional and global power grows. Further, military centrality in foreign relations has shaped China's decision-making, particularly regarding the Sino-Indian border dispute.⁶ Yet it is important to remember that Xi, in his initial years as leader, viewed India rather cordially. Beijing's decision-making regarding the China-India boundary was shaped by the goal of cooperative engagement with India to chalk out a partnership under the Chinese umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative

⁶ John W. Garver, "China's Decision for War with India in 1962," in *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, ed. Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 86–130.

and to appease India as a hedge against the United States' regional strategy and initiatives. These efforts were supported by China's neighborhood diplomacy policy and the "developmental partnership" outlined by the Xi and Modi administrations in 2014. In addition, as its naval might and self-assurance grew, China perceived friendly ties with India as a prerequisite for extending its reach into the Indian Ocean, which could have resulted in peaceful progress and aid in establishing a Sino-centric regional order. Thus, improving relations with India was high on China's foreign policy agenda. In 2014, Xi even authored an article in an Indian newspaper following his three-day state visit to India amid tensions in the Chumar valley, which argued that China and India must emerge as "cooperation partners" to take forward the "Asian century of prosperity."⁷

However, China's outlook on its border conflict with India swung sharply later in the decade, as Beijing attempted to unilaterally impose its land claims, thereby raising tensions. This pivot can be attributed to two key factors: first, the changing security environment and great-power politics China faced; and second, China's changing perception of India as India became an increasingly assertive voice in regional geopolitics as an Indo-Pacific power. Beijing's perspective of India as a developmental partner had, if anything, been overshadowed by its assessment of India and the boundary dispute through the prism of the historical Tibet issue. Particularly under Xi, China's Tibet policy to a great extent has been built on caution as well as assertion. This policy is underpinned by the Mao Zedong-era fears of India attempting to undermine Chinese influence in the region and desiring to weaken China's hold on Tibet by leveraging the Dalai Lama's ties with India. This wary perception toward India has been deep-seated in China's decision-making process for decades and is bound to persist until the succession of the fourteenth Dalai Lama is settled. On Tibet as a territorial question, Xi, like Mao, has concentrated on the other "five fingers" of the Tibetan Plateau, which include the northeastern Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, the Indian territory of Ladakh, and the countries of Bhutan and Nepal. As demonstrated by the December 2022 encounter between Indian and Chinese forces in Arunachal Pradesh, Xi wants to continue to solidify China's authority in the area, with Tibet taking on more significance as a key concern, especially as potential Dalai Lama succession politics could unravel at any time.

⁷ Xi Jinping, "Towards an Asian Century of Prosperity," *Hindu*, September 17, 2014, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/towards-an-asian-century-of-prosperity/article6416553.ece>.

In this context, Beijing has been investing heavily in the region through developmental projects and military means. In China's perception, a stable, safe, and infrastructurally advanced border region (including in the Tibetan Plateau) would thwart India's attempts to weaken China's influence and power in the Himalayan valley. At the same time, demonstrating Beijing's power and tactical advantage over New Delhi would effectively keep India's fast-paced infrastructural development plan in the area under check. Though the Galwan Valley clash was more a military response to the Doklam clash of 2017, which the PLA perceived as a moral loss, it was equally perpetuated by India's construction of the Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) road.⁸ The connection between the December 2022 Tawang clash and India's construction of the frontier highway in Arunachal Pradesh must be made along these lines.

Thus, Xi has paid distinct attention to the PLA Western Theater Command. This is the largest of China's five theater commands, controlling the country's frontiers with Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Myanmar. The Chinese personnel and property along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor are among the targets of its duties. Further, it is the same command that played an instrumental role in orchestrating the tensions in the Ladakh region in April 2020. The uniqueness of the Western Theater Command can be evaluated by reviewing the fact that it comprises two military districts: the Tibet Military District and the Xinjiang Military District, both of which fall under the direct control of the PLA Ground Force.⁹ Further, in contrast to other theater commands administered and led by the CMC, the Tibet and Xinjiang military districts have been upgraded to mini-theater or subset unit status. This signifies the influence of the Tibet and Xinjiang military districts, which might possess the charge of military and strategic planning during a conflict.¹⁰

Additionally, China has been emphasizing the growth of the Western Theater Command, approving large-scale infrastructure projects to increase

⁸ “从洞朗到加勒万河谷:警惕中印边界问题的三个改变” [From Doklam to Galwan Valley: Be Wary of Three Changes on the Sino-Indian Border Issue], Institute of Regional and Country Studies, Peking University, August 29, 2020, available at https://m.thepaper.cn/baijiaohao_8911416.

⁹ Kevin McCauley, “Snapshot: China's Western Theater Command,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief, January 13, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/snapshot-chinas-western-theater-command>.

¹⁰ “PLA Modernizes Xinjiang's Military Units in ‘Reaction’ to India-China LAC Row,” *Hindustan Times*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/pla-modernises-xinjiang-s-military-units-in-reaction-to-india-china-lac-row-101621231048385.html>; “PLA Xinjiang Military Command Commissions First Type 15 Light Tanks,” China Military, February 1, 2022, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/WeaponryEquipment/News_209182/9978551.html; and M.S. Prathibha, “PLA's Western Theatre Command in Transition,” Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, Issue Brief, November 9, 2021, <https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/pla-western-theatre-command-ms-prathibha-091121>.

its capabilities. Military development has included providing it with cutting-edge hardware and the newest jet aircraft ahead of most of the other theater commands. Developmental initiatives, particularly under the 14th Five-Year Plan, also play a major role in restating the CCP's priorities in developing the Tibet region. In particular, the Chinese government aims to finish building new railways, a new highway, and 30 additional airfields in the Tibet Autonomous Region and its environs by 2030–35.¹¹

Xi's Political Choice and Political Brass on India

The events of the 20th National Congress of the CCP, held in October 2022, further underscored the party's heightened attention on the Sino-Indian border dispute and the importance of the Western Theater Command.¹² As a part of the National Congress convened every five years, the CCP selected 2,296 delegates for the key meeting “in accordance with the party Constitution” and “under the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.”¹³ Significantly, this included the selection of 30 delegates from the Western Theater Command—nearly double that of the other four theater commands—to showcase its strategically prime position in Xi's decision-making. Further, the CCP elected PLA commander Qi Fabao, who was reportedly injured in the skirmishes with Indian soldiers in the Galwan Valley clash in 2020, as one of the Western Theater Command's delegates. The party also played a video clip from the clash at the meeting to showcase the victories of the PLA in the conflict,¹⁴ further signifying the growing importance of the role played by the boundary dispute in Xi's strategic and political reckonings.

The 20th Party Congress points toward a renewed focus by Xi on South Asia, and particularly India. This has been demonstrated through Xi's evident selection and elevation of candidates with robust experience in managing China-India relations. The most evident is Ding Xuexiang—selected as a member of the Politburo Standing Committee—who accompanied Xi during his visit to Mamallapuram in 2019, along with Yang Jiechi and

¹¹ Jayadev Ranade, “Xi Strengthens Western Theatre Command,” *Tribune* (India), September 19, 2022, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/xi-strengthens-western-theatre-command-433039>.

¹² Eerishika Pankaj, “China's 20th Party Congress and Implications for India,” Organisation for Research on China and Asia, November 14, 2022, <https://orcasia.org/chinas-20th-party-congress-and-implications-for-india>.

¹³ “Details of Party Congress Delegates Expounded, 33.6% from Frontlines of Work and Production,” *People's Daily*, September 27, 2022, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0927/c90000-10152102.html>.

¹⁴ “At Communist Party Congress, China Plays Galwan Valley Video,” *Daily Guardian*, October 17, 2022, <https://theguardian.com/at-communist-party-congress-china-plays-galwan-valley-video>.

He Lifeng.¹⁵ Termed as Xi's "most trusted aide,"¹⁶ Ding has experience in agenda planning, briefings, and foreign travel to India that could lead the CCP to strengthen its focus on Sino-Indian relations.

Apart from Ding, the connections to India of General He Weidong, who serves as vice chair of the CMC and a member of the current Politburo, are also rather interesting.¹⁷ Having dealt with border matters related to India, particularly as commander of the PLA Ground Force in the Western Theater Command from July 2016 to December 2019, General He would have been at the forefront of shaping China's military posture during the Doklam standoff in 2017. He might have also played a prominent role in setting the decision-making stage during the Galwan Valley clashes in 2020. Promoting someone with such crucial on-the-ground experience is evidence of Xi's commitment to bringing in those who are proficient with the military posturing of the Indian side and could lead the PLA successfully during another localized conflict with the Indian Army. Also picked to join the Central Committee were Li Fengbiao, who, as the political commissar of the Western Theater Command, will be tasked with ensuring the implementation of Xi's political agenda in the region,¹⁸ and Xu Qiling, who currently serves on the Joint Staff Department of the CMC and was the commander of the Western Theater Command in 2020.¹⁹ As mentioned earlier, these appointments signify Xi's changing tactical focus on the China-India boundary, while the Politburo and Central Committee appointments reiterate the robust current and future implications for India and its strategic relations with China.

¹⁵ "Brief Introductions of Members of CPC Central Leading Bodies," *China Daily*, October 24, 2022, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202210/24/WS635569c9a310fd2b29e7e107_6.html; "Xi Jinping Meets with Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), Press Release, October 12, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/2711_663426/2713_663430/201910/t20191015_513388.html; and "Xi Jinping and Other Leaders Meet with Delegates, Specially Invited Delegates and Non-voting Participants of 20th CPC National Congress," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), Press Release, October 23, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221024_10791272.html.

¹⁶ Jane Cai, "Ding Xuexiang, 'Xi's Most Trusted Aide,' Joins Party's Top Decision-making Body," *South China Morning Post*, October 24, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3196878/ding-xuexiang-xis-most-trusted-aide-joins-partys-top-decision-making-body>.

¹⁷ Ministry of National Defense (PRC), "He Weidong," October 23, 2022, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/leadership/2022-10/23/content_4924242.htm.

¹⁸ "How Did the 20th Party Congress Impact China's Military?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, ChinaPower, October 25, 2022, <https://chinapower.csis.org/20th-party-congress-china-military-pla-cmc>.

¹⁹ 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, "List of Members of 20th CPC Central Committee," October 22, 2022, http://english.scio.gov.cn/20thcpcongress/2022-10/22/content_78480697.html; and Minnie Chan, "China Puts Rising Star in Command of Forces in Border Face-off Against India," *South China Morning Post*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3088099/china-puts-rising-star-command-forces-border-face-against-india>.

Executing the Executive Decisions of Xi Jinping

Apart from military appointments, it is worth examining the appointments to the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, which sets the foundation for China's foreign policy planning and execution and concurrently influences Beijing's ties with New Delhi. The most interesting appointment here remains that of state councilor and foreign minister Wang Yi, whose "wolf warrior" tactics, particularly during the Galwan Valley standoff, raised many eyebrows in India. More recently, Wang represented the PRC on March 25, 2022, during a surprise visit to India after stopovers in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He was the first high-level Chinese official to visit India since December 2019. The appointment can be considered a reiteration of China's determination to showcase a firm attitude toward India, particularly at the border. Wang's "four-pronged perseverance"—reaching strategic consensus, sidelining boundary issues, leveraging common strengths, and expanding "Oriental" multilateral cooperation—seems to be the direction in which the bilateral relationship will head if China controls the discourse.²⁰

Furthermore, the United States is now permanently dominant in China's strategic outlook toward India. The Arunachal Pradesh border clash in December 2022 took place only days after the conclusion of joint U.S.-India war games. Unlike in Galwan, disengagement following the clash was immediate in this case; however, it must be viewed as a sign of potentially increasing violence within the LAC commands.²¹ Significantly, China had not previously considered India a primary threat or an equal power²² but, judging New Delhi by its comprehensive national power, a secondary power.²³ However, with the United States and India working together on defense, China faces a much more genuine and severe threat along its southern border and in the Indian Ocean. Cooperation of this sort not only would likely jeopardize the safety and stability of China's western borderlands and weaken its strategic influence in South Asia, but it could

²⁰ "Wang Yi Meets with New Indian Ambassador to China Pradeep Kumar Rawat," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), Press Release, June 22, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202206/t20220623_10708685.html.

²¹ Khushboo Razdan, "Indian and Chinese Troops Clash at Disputed Border Days after U.S.-India Joint War Games," *South China Morning Post*, December 13, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3203054/indian-and-chinese-troops-clash-disputed-border>.

²² Selina Ho, "China's Shifting Perceptions of India: The Context of Xi Jinping's Visit to India," East-West Center, *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, no. 278, October 2014, <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/56efe87f-6516-4ddf-be1e-ffb672074c12/content>.

²³ Yun Sun, "China's Strategic Assessment of India," *War on the Rocks*, March 25, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-india>.

jeopardize China's access to energy from the Middle East by impeding the country's power-projection capabilities in the Indian Ocean.²⁴ Moreover, the United States' recognition of India's leadership role in the Indian Ocean weakens (and even severely challenges) China's influence in the region and the world at large, while encouraging Japan, Australia, and other Indo-Pacific countries to forge stronger ties with New Delhi.²⁵

In this light, the idea that outside factors play a major role in China's tense relationship with India is troubling to Beijing. Many of its policies toward India have been influenced by the path that New Delhi and Washington have taken together. As a matter of fact, the PRC's decision-making toward India is controlled by the belief that India's decisions are influenced by the United States,²⁶ and India requires the support of the United States to counter China's expanding regional dominance.²⁷ Beijing's critical view toward India persists irrespective of India maintaining "strategic autonomy" and seeking diverse partnerships, including with Russia (a U.S. adversary and a strong partner of China). This hostility has increased since India has enhanced its strategic ties with the United States, along with participating in groupings like the Quad, involving the United States, Japan, and Australia, as well as having established strong defense ties through defense industry cooperation, arms sales, and information- and intelligence-sharing mechanisms.²⁸

Thus, several factors, including China's ambition to secure its borders and core interests, along with its resolve to reject the growing U.S. influence, have likely influenced China's decision-making in the boundary dispute with India. This case also sheds light on China's views on other middle powers and great powers, revealing how the country's behavior and stance in a conflict shift depending on the opponent's level of global or regional

²⁴ Antara Ghosal Singh, "China's Evolving Strategic Discourse on India," Stimson Center, Policy Paper, May 4, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/chinas-evolving-strategic-discourse-on-india>.

²⁵ Jagannath Panda, "Beijing's Asian NATO Maxim on Quad Is Structural," Pacific Forum, PacNet, no. 61, November 22, 2019, <https://idsa.in/system/files/news/PacNet-Commentary-Beijing.pdf>.

²⁶ Lan Jianxue and Lin Duo, "China-India Ties Can't Be Sacrificed for American Interests," *China Daily*, September 16, 2022, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202209/16/WS6323c21ba310fd2b29e77f14.html>; and Qian Feng, "Alliance with U.S. Will Crush India's Great Power Fantasies," *Global Times*, November 1, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1237838.shtml>.

²⁷ Hu Xijin, "It's Not in India's Interest to Be a U.S. Outpost," *Global Times*, July 19, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202207/1270896.shtml>.

²⁸ Hu Weijia, "Rosy India-U.S. Trade Data May Be a Danger to New Delhi," *Global Times*, May 30, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202205/1266944.shtml>.

influence.²⁹ In this context, China's attitude toward middle powers is likely to possess an amalgamation of status quo and revisionist elements. Whereas the status quo attitude would have ensured a stable environment for China to rise peacefully, revisionist perceptions would lead China to expand its interests and respond assertively to secure its core strategic goals.³⁰

Judging from recent events, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, China has been gradually adopting an assertive, revisionist outlook toward many middle powers. If anything, China is demonstrating its unyielding nature and employing more aggressive measures toward countries it does not view as being on par with its power. For instance, it has been using assertive diplomacy and a belligerent stance at the LAC, while mobilizing resources to achieve a decisive victory on the battlefield just like it did during the border conflict of 1962.

The 2017 Doklam standoff was a turning point in how China viewed India strategically. Neither country used force, but India's bold stance prompted Beijing to re-evaluate New Delhi's geopolitical mettle. This re-evaluation contested China's long-held bias against India as occupying a position of inferiority in the regional power hierarchy. Moreover, China's increased military and developmental spending in the border region, as well as Xi's carefully selected CCP appointments, has further confirmed this changing attitude toward India.

Exploring Drivers of LAC Escalation under Xi Jinping

The disputed territory between India and China spans several provinces and regions, from Ladakh (primarily per Chinese claim only) in the northwest to India's northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh (again per

²⁹ The term "middle powers" is used to describe a broad coalition of similar, mid-sized countries that are traditionally considered U.S. democratic allies or partners, but that have strengthened their collaborations with one another and taken it upon themselves to advocate for multilateral solutions to various global and regional challenges in the absence of U.S. leadership. See Erik Brattberg, "Middle Power Diplomacy in an Age of U.S.-China Tensions," *Washington Quarterly* 44, no.1 (2021): 219–38; and Yuan Sha, "China's Dilemma toward Middle Powers in the Asia-Pacific Region" (paper presented at the 2019 U.S. Naval War College and East Asia Security Centre conference, July 2020), <https://easc.scholasticahq.com/api/v1/articles/14476-china-s-dilemma-toward-middle-powers-in-the-asia-pacific-region.pdf>.

³⁰ Dong Ryul Lee, "China's Perception of and Strategy for the Middle Powers," East Asia Institute, Middle Power Diplomacy Initiative, Working Paper, no. 10, December 2014, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/187156/08.12.2014.pdf>.

Chinese claim only).³¹ Any potential delineation will have to encompass three key verticals: clarification of the boundary, alignment of the LAC, and implementation of the processes. The last major China-India conflict before Doklam that tilted on the verge of war but was defused without bloodshed was in 1987 in the Sumdorong Chu Valley.³² The other notable conflicts occurred in 1975, 1967, and 1962.³³ However, as soon as Xi Jinping came to power, the frequency of border clashes rose—Depsang in 2013, Chumar in 2014 during Xi's India visit, Doklam in 2017, and Galwan Valley in 2020—with the intensity (and length) growing with each conflict.³⁴ The media has reported a 75% increase in Chinese border crossings in Ladakh in 2022 over the contested boundary, and the conflict is exacerbated by the two countries' divergent views of the LAC.³⁵ China now argues that Indian action along the border is limited to 三板斧 (“three axes”): attempting to build military power, strengthening control over the area via legislation, and carrying out infrastructure construction.³⁶

From a wider perspective, the PLA may receive the most attention from Indian military experts and strategists, but, as shown, the CCP holds the real power. Xi is effectively in charge of the entire party-state, including the military, through the secretariat. China's increased use of force along its borders must be viewed in light of his unwavering commitment to total

³¹ China claims 90,000 square kilometers (km²) of land in northeastern India, an area it refers to as “southern Tibet,” which approximately coincides with the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. See “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on January 21, 2021,” *China Daily*, January 22, 2021, <https://govt.chinadaily.com.cn/s/202101/21/WS602f6f9e498e7a02c6f6899e/foreign-ministry-spokesperson-hua-chunying's-regular-press-conference-on-january-21-2021.html>. As for India, it claims Arunachal Pradesh and the entire Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh as an integral part of India. Thus, India claims an additional 5,180 km² of territory that Pakistan occupied in 1947–48 and ceded to China in 1963, in addition to the 38,000 km² of Aksai Chin that it lost to China in the 1962 war. See “Information Sought under Right to Information Act, 2005,” Ministry of External Affairs (India), December 14, 2020, https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/amb/RTI_15_12_03.pdf.

³² In 1986, India granted statehood to the contested Arunachal Pradesh territory; the conflict ultimately led to the 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the LAC, though the crisis only ended in 1995. See Nayanima Basu and Srijan Shukla, “Sumdorong Chu, Ladakh-like India-China Face-off Which Took 9 Yrs to End but Without Violence,” *Print (India)*, June 30, 2020, <https://theprint.in/past-forward/sumdorong-chu-ladakh-like-india-china-face-off-which-took-9-yrs-to-end-but-without-violence/451517>.

³³ Xuanzun and Xin, “China Urges India to Restrain.”

³⁴ Ashley J. Tellis, “Hustling in the Himalayas: The Sino-Indian Border Confrontation,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 4, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/04/hustling-in-himalayas-sino-indian-border-confrontation-pub-81979>.

³⁵ Sushant Singh, “Explained: What Does the Increase in Chinese Transgressions Mean?” *Indian Express*, June 16, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/chinese-transgressions-ladakh-line-of-actual-control-6421855>.

³⁶ Zhang Zhaozhong, “印军越过中印边境挑衅 张召忠: 要报当年战败之仇?” [The Indian Army Crossed the Sino-Indian Border to Provoke Zhang Zhaozhong: Were They Trying to Avenge a Past Defeat?], *Sina*, May 22, 2020, <https://mil.news.sina.com.cn/jssd/2020-05-22/doc-irucyvi4432817.shtml>.

obedience; constant battle preparedness (which means renouncing “leisure hours” even in times of peace); a smaller, more streamlined military; and a worldwide power-projection system.³⁷

Further, the Chinese military strategy reflects the changes in China’s national and global security environment in the domains of economics, technology, and security. The strategy has evolved from emphasizing the “immediate and potential threats of local wars” in 2015 to being combat ready for “Informationized Warfare, and [on-the-horizon] intelligent warfare” in 2019.³⁸ Traditionally, China has relied greatly on “preemptive military action,” which it refers to as “defensive in nature”; however, no clear distinction exists between its defensive and offensive tactics.³⁹ Beijing’s strategy toward India is naturally drawn from this overall trajectory of military and strategic outlook as a competing power.

For a long time, India neglected the roads along the LAC in an effort to block easy Chinese access into Indian territory and to delay large-scale invasion. This stance created hindrances in military transportation and mobilization for the Indian side amid smaller incursions and limited conflicts. However, as India sought to remedy its lack of border infrastructure, China grew uneasy, and its actions in the ensuing years have been tactical considerations undoubtedly approved by the top leadership.⁴⁰ Naturally, these decisions were not made in silos but supported the wider diplomatic and military goals that Xi has been espousing. Criticism of China for its role in the emergence and spread of Covid-19, as well as concerted Western efforts to decouple from China, left the country increasingly isolated. Comments by

³⁷ “Xi Focus: Top Commander’s Call to Strengthen National Defense,” Xinhua, March 8, 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220308/425ef488720c4a67bc9c0e9797cd7ce7/c.html>; and “Xi Takes Charge: Implications of the 19th Party Congress for China’s Future,” UC San Diego, School of Global Policy and Strategy, October 2017, http://china.ucsd.edu/_files/2017_xi-briefing-web.pdf.

³⁸ State Council Information Office (PRC), *China’s Military Strategy* (Beijing, May 2015), http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm; and State Council Information (PRC), *China’s National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing, July 2019), http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/24/content_WS5d3941ddc6d08408f502283d.html.

³⁹ Iskander Rehman, “A Himalayan Challenge: India’s Conventional Deterrent and the Role of Special Operations Forces along the Sino-Indian Border,” *Naval War College Review* 70, no. 1 (2017): 104–42.

⁴⁰ Anurag Kotoky and N.C. Bipindra, “After Decades of Neglect, India Builds Roads along China Border,” *Economic Times*, July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/after-decades-of-neglect-india-builds-roads-along-china-border/articleshow/58833597.cms>; and Shiv Shankar Menon, “What China Hopes to Gain from the Present Border Standoff with India,” *Wire (India)*, December 3, 2020, <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/what-changed-india-china-ties-2020-result-rising-tensions>.

the editor-in-chief of the state-media outlet *Global Times* terming isolation as “misperception” were rather telling.⁴¹

Notwithstanding the wider politics, in the last ten years, several road and rail projects along the border have been announced by India and fast-tracked by the current Modi government, and multiple advanced landing grounds have been operationalized (and revived) near the LAC. One of the most important triggers has been the construction of the 255-kilometer-long, all-weather Darbuk-Shyok-DBO road, which played a key role in the Galwan Valley clash. The road took about twenty years to complete (2000–19) and gives military access to a section of the Tibet-Xinjiang region, inciting tensions since the conflict in nearby Depsang in 2013.⁴² This region is important to China in order to separate Tibet from Xinjiang, where disquiet has been growing in recent years. It is also strategically significant for its airstrip. The road runs parallel to the LAC in the China-occupied Aksai Chin region; it is strategically important for the overall monitoring of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.⁴³ Further, the opening of the Bailey Bridge in Ladakh in 2019 has added to contention, as it might be seen as a boost to military planning.⁴⁴

In addition, Indian policy has started shifting from a canvas of “deterrence denial” strategy to “deterrence to pressure and punishment” on China. Responding hard to the PLA’s aggressive posture has emerged as a “new normal” strategy for the Indian military. This is primarily due to China’s increasingly forward deployment, coupled with infrastructure development and rapid military modernization at the border and in the Indian Ocean, to gain a tactical advantage. Pangong Lake and the Galwan Valley region are old flashpoints that were reignited in 2020 for much of the same reasons influencing the broader regional and international dynamics. This has led India toward “expanding and escalating the conflict into new areas and avenues,” as well as creating specialized mechanized brigades, such

⁴¹ Christina Lin, “Coronavirus Solidifies U.S.-China Decoupling,” *Asia Times*, February 15, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/02/coronavirus-solidifies-us-china-decoupling/>; and Hu Xijin, “China Isolation’ Is a Seriously Wrong Impression,” *Global Times*, September 6, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1200010.shtml>.

⁴² Prem Shankar Jha, “Are China and India Going Back to 1962?” *Wire (India)*, May 29, 2020, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/china-india-border-tensions-1962/>; and Nirupama Subramanian, “The Strategic Road to DBO,” *Indian Express*, June 16, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/lac-stand-off-india-china-darbuk-shyok-daulat-beg-oldie-dsdbo-road-6452997>.

⁴³ Subramanian, “The Strategic Road to DBO.”

⁴⁴ “Border Road Organisation Rebuilds Bailey Bridge Near China Border,” *Indian Express*, June 16, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/lac-stand-off-india-china-darbuk-shyok-daulat-beg-oldie-dsdbo-road-6452997>.

as the Mountain Strike Corps (envisaged in the 2000s and sanctioned in 2013), and raising two mountain divisions in 2010.⁴⁵

Such decisions have invited criticism from the Chinese strategic community, which considered the Galwan Valley clash an “inevitable result of India’s tough foreign policy featuring high-risk, high-yield [ventures] pursued by the Modi administration toward China.”⁴⁶ According to an article by Hu Shisheng and Wang Jue, New Delhi’s main objective through this tactic was to overtake Beijing by taking advantage of India’s favorable external strategic environment.⁴⁷ These decisions together have possibly prompted the Chinese side to test India and showcase its superiority. Chinese policy experts had noted the Indian decisions and reiterated China’s intention to strengthen its position in border areas (while emphasizing its self-defense and post-strike policies).⁴⁸ PRC leaders have long asserted the need to sidestep the unresolved border issue in favor of pursuing bilateral ties—a priority that China’s state councilor and foreign minister Wang Yi has reiterated in the last couple of years.

Chinese experts have repeatedly referenced the 1962 war as evidence that India is unable to analyze the root cause of conflicts with China and uses these disputes to “curry favor” with the United States.⁴⁹ Such psychological games were especially important before the Doklam standoff, when China aimed to crush the Indian spirit. In addition, China has time and again criticized India’s “frontier mentality,” which is likely a reference to the “forward policy” that New Delhi adopted prior to the 1962 war.⁵⁰ India’s plans to construct several new posts along the border (which China worried

⁴⁵ Yogesh Joshi and Anit Mukherjee, “From Denial to Punishment: The Security Dilemma and Changes in India’s Military Strategy towards China,” *Asian Security* 15, no. 1 (2019): 25–43; and Subir Bhaumik, “India to Deploy 36,000 Extra Troops on Chinese Border,” BBC News, November 23, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11818840>.

⁴⁶ Hu Sheuisheng and Wang Jue, “The Behavioral Logic behind India’s Tough Foreign Policy toward China,” *Contemporary International Relations*, September/October 2020, <http://www.cicir.ac.cn/UpFiles/file/20201103/6373999766705249491072987.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Li Cong, “India Mulls Mountain Teams to Strengthen Border against China,” *Global Times*, January 1, 2013, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/755837.shtml>.

⁴⁹ Yang Sheng, “India Will Pay Heavy Price If It ‘Miscalculates China,’” *Global Times*, June 24, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1192631.shtml>.

⁵⁰ Liu Zongyi, “India Still Conserves Frontier Mentality over 1962 Border War with China,” *Global Times*, December 13, 2012, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/749877.shtml>; and Prem Shankar Jha, “Why It Is Imperative That Indians Come to Know What Happened in 1962,” *Wire (India)*, June 5, 2020, <https://thewire.in/security/china-india-1962-war-henderson-brooks-bhagat-report>.

would cross the LAC) and for the border police to step up security have thus awakened the ghost of the 1962 war, for which China still blames India.⁵¹

Similar fears were in play in 2017 and 2020. Chinese military and diplomatic circles put the blame for the Doklam and Galwan clashes on “provocative and planned” military operations by Indian troops and highlighted India’s infrastructure buildup as a means to create new tensions.⁵² Some have explicitly described India’s construction of new roads as akin to inciting war, while delineating China’s motive as being to create wealth, by stating that “roads can be the path to wealth or the way to war.”⁵³ The Doklam standoff was unusual in two ways. First, it took place in the middle sector, the less contentious and only delimited sector, where maps have been exchanged. Second, it openly displayed China’s intent to contain, or at the very least unsettle, India’s hold on South Asia, which is perceived as India’s historical bastion.

China has not denied that the building of the road was the cause, but instead has argued that the road was within Chinese territory (not Bhutanese, as claimed by India) and that India violated the 1890 treaty between China and Great Britain by entering.⁵⁴ Again in 2020, China’s foreign and defense ministries blamed Indian border troops and the road and bridge construction at the LAC in the Galwan Valley for the altercation. According to China, the Indian side violated the June 5 corps commander–level agreement and again crossed into Chinese territory recognized by both countries, unilaterally provoking the Chinese side and then playing the blame game.⁵⁵ Additionally, Chinese strategic discourse pointed to India’s need to divert attention from domestic inadequacies such as the worsening Covid-19 pandemic and the economic slump amid rising nationalism.⁵⁶

However, one of the legitimate triggers for the clash in the Galwan Valley could be India changing the status of Ladakh into a union territory (and thus placing it under tighter central control) by amending

⁵¹ Liu Zongyi, “Provocative Border Posts Add to Tension,” *Global Times*, September 8, 2013, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/809563.shtml>.

⁵² “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), Press Release, June 17, 2020, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgmb/eng/fyrth/t1789509.htm>.

⁵³ Zhao Xiaozhuo, “Why Is India Sensitive to China’s Road Building?” *China Daily*, July 26, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2017-07/26/content_30247528.htm; and Liu Lin, “India-China Doklam Standoff: A Chinese Perspective,” *Diplomat*, July 27, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/07/india-china-doklam-standoff-a-chinese-perspective>.

⁵⁴ “Full Text of Facts and China’s Position Concerning Indian Border Troops’ Crossing of China-India Boundary,” *China Daily*, August 3, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-08/03/content_30341027.htm.

⁵⁵ Sheng, “India Will Pay Heavy Price If It ‘Miscalculates China.’”

⁵⁶ Xuanzun and Xin, “China Urges India to Restrain.”

its constitution. Beijing called the act a unilateral attempt to undermine “China’s territorial sovereignty.”⁵⁷ Though this decision, from the Indian perspective, revolves around the Kashmir issue, China viewed the domestic administrative decision as an “unlawful and void” move affecting areas under its control. A closed-door meeting at the UN Security Council held at China’s behest yielded no agreement.⁵⁸ China may have anticipated this outcome, using the UN Security Council merely as a psychological tool, or the lack of support may have been interpreted as a failure and added to the border tensions.

The historical angle is of particular significance. The Chinese narrative after the 2020 Galwan Valley conflict, which resurrected the debates over the 1962 war on both sides of the border, highlighted the following similarities.⁵⁹ First, the Chinese narrative accused India of taking advantage of China’s global isolationism. In the present era, the theories about China’s role in the origin and spread of Covid-19, the consequent decoupling actions by the rest of the world, and the damage to China’s image thus constitute a powerful trigger.⁶⁰ Second, this narrative highlighted India’s policy assertiveness and aggressive rhetoric in public speeches. A third similarity is China’s confusion about what it regards as India’s strategic obsession toward China as a strategic concern and threat due to its far superior military capability (then and now). In 2020, the confusion was all the more pronounced because China is now economically leaps and bounds ahead of India as well.⁶¹

Another point of contention for China is India’s proactive approach regarding Bhutan’s interests, as well as toward other South Asian states. Beijing has been trying to break into the traditional Indian sphere of influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean through coercive and

⁵⁷ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Remarks on the Indian Government’s Announcement of the Establishment of the Ladakh Union Territory Which Involves Chinese Territory,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), August 6, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/201908/t20190806_696969.html.

⁵⁸ “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), Press Release, October 31, 2019, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgmb/eng/fyrth/t1712371.htm>; and Hong Xiao, “China Says Kashmir Issue Should be Resolved Peacefully,” *China Daily*, August 17, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201908/17/WS5d5713f6a310cf3e35566439.html>.

⁵⁹ Zhang Sheng, “Unwise Choice for India to Replay 1962,” *Global Times*, September 13, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1200748.shtml>.

⁶⁰ During this period, China was heading for a split with the Soviet Union, and the United States supported the Indian government in the war, almost being on the brink of war itself. See Bruce Riedel, “As India and China Clash, JFK’s ‘Forgotten Crisis’ Is Back,” Brookings Institution, June 17, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/06/17/as-india-and-china-clash-jfks-forgotten-crisis-is-back>.

⁶¹ During the 1962 war, China was just coming out of a drastic famine, but militarily it was still stronger than India.

cooperative tactics with other South Asian states.⁶² The Doklam incident, as well as the consequent halting of the “Three-Step Roadmap for Expediting the China-Bhutan Boundary Negotiation” at a critical juncture, was also meant to highlight to Bhutan, which notably does not have diplomatic relations with China, the inadequacy of having India as a security provider.⁶³

China’s strategy toward South Asia begs deeper examination. In particular, under Xi Jinping, China’s India policy has attempted to constrain New Delhi’s growing influence by developing ties with smaller countries in the region. Thus, China’s decision-making approach toward India, particularly along their border, has focused on expanding China’s emerging influence in South Asia, underpinned by its periphery or neighborhood diplomacy.⁶⁴ Within this context, China has emphasized the Belt and Road Initiative to increase trade incentives and transport connectivity between itself and South Asian nations, expressed a desire to join the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, and maintained an “all-weather friendship” with Pakistan.

Chinese analysts have admitted that India “stands in the way” of China’s outreach to Bhutan due to India’s long-standing historical, cultural, diplomatic, and defense ties with the country.⁶⁵ In recent years, India’s ties with its traditionally favorable Himalayan neighbor states (Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan) have become strained as these countries have shown a tilt toward China.⁶⁶ At the same time, Chinese experts recognize that India’s concerns about its vulnerable “chicken’s neck,” or the Siliguri Corridor—control of which would allow China to isolate northeast India from the rest of the country in the event of a war—were a prime motive for the escalated reaction.⁶⁷

⁶² Jagannath Panda, “China’s Projection and Pursuit of Power in South Asia: Implications for India,” testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., May 12, 2022, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/Jagannath_Panda_Testimony.pdf.

⁶³ Negotiations were launched in 1984, and Bhutan and China ultimately signed a memorandum of understanding on the Three-Step Roadmap on October 14, 2021. See “China and Bhutan Sign MoU on a Three-Step Roadmap for Expediting the China-Bhutan Boundary Negotiation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), Press Release, October 15, 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjwb_663304/zygy_663314/gyhd_663338/202110/t20211016_9550700.html; and Wang Qi, “China, Bhutan Agree to Maintain Border Peace and Stability,” *Global Times*, April 9, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1220652.shtml>.

⁶⁴ Shen Dingli, “Diplomacy with Neighbors,” *China Daily*, October 30, 2013, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2013-10/30/content_17067913.htm.

⁶⁵ Qi, “China, Bhutan Agree to Maintain Border Peace and Stability.”

⁶⁶ Panda, “China’s Projection and Pursuit of Power in South Asia.”

⁶⁷ Lin, “India-China Doklam Standoff: A Chinese Perspective.”

China's India Policy: A Shift in Perspective

Perhaps one of the most important geopolitical events in 2017–18 was the souring of ties between China and the United States, which deteriorated into a veritable trade war with massive global implications.⁶⁸ As the U.S.-China relationship worsened, Beijing saw shoring up its posture and establishing itself as the foremost power in Asia as essential. In other words, China was keen to ensure that India would not be a party to the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and would instead possibly prefer to emerge as an important strategic node in Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, as India partnered with China in the formation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

However, India has continued to criticize the Belt and Road Initiative as being a threat to its national sovereignty and territorial integrity and has shown solidarity with Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy by agreeing to take part in the Quad talks alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia. During this time, China's strategy shifted to provoking India to push it into submission. Drawing on lessons learned from the 1962 war, China believed that the use of force could result in long-lasting peace. Considering the asymmetry in comprehensive national power, China also believed that the political cost of asserting its border claims and its dominant power would be negligible and that India would be unwilling to mount a major military operation in response to these provocations. To some extent, the standoff at Doklam reinforced these assumptions. Although India criticized the Belt and Road Initiative and adopted an Indo-Pacific focus in its foreign policy, it also refrained from explicitly calling out China on its encroachment and occupation of territory. This only gave Beijing further confidence to systematically carry out its "salami slicing" endeavors in Ladakh in a bid to achieve its tactical goals.⁶⁹ These aggressive tactics included the construction of outposts and other infrastructure close to areas that Beijing's interpretation of the LAC considers Chinese territory.

In sum, China's India policy seemingly shifted from a charm offensive (inducing cooperation through incentives and concessions) to one of incrementally aggressive military tactics aimed at convincing India to move away from the United States. A year after the Galwan Valley skirmishes, the Chinese state media pushed a narrative that India had "repaid the capital

⁶⁸ "A Quick Guide to the U.S.-China Trade War," BBC News, January 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-45899310>.

⁶⁹ Brahma Chellaney, "China's Himalayan Salami Tactics," Project Syndicate, March 9, 2021, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/xi-jinping-salami-tactics-himalayas-south-china-sea-by-brahma-chellaney-2021-03>.

with interest” because New Delhi overestimated its own strategic virtue.⁷⁰ Ultimately, the PRC’s objective vis-à-vis India aligned with its overall neighborhood strategy to secure “a China-centred regional order with Beijing as the sole leader or rule-maker in the region.”⁷¹

Equally important is China’s shift to a more belligerent attitude with respect to India, aimed at checking New Delhi’s quickly expanding presence on the regional and international stages. The PRC wants to put a halt to India’s rise by leveraging its greater economic and military strength. Beijing attests that India is looking to “force” China into settling the boundary dispute, with “China-U.S. strategic rivalry and Hindu nationalism” driving India’s behavior. Furthermore, the Chinese strategic community has presented the 2017 Doklam standoff as a “peaceful resolution” that has “emboldened” India.⁷²

Therefore, China views India concurrently through multiple lenses beyond merely their bilateral differences in the boundary dispute. Other factors include strategic competition between China and the United States, the broader geopolitical and security landscape in the Indo-Pacific (especially within South Asia), and China’s objectives in the region as it rises. Hence, to understand the factors responsible for the ongoing standoff at the LAC, it is vital to recognize that for Beijing the dispute is about much more than the boundary line between the two countries and is a step toward achieving its larger political goals regionally and globally.

Conclusion: Outlook for the Border Dispute

The China-India border dispute must be seen as a corollary of the wider geopolitics at play. The stalemate in border negotiations has persisted, even over three years after the Galwan Valley incident. Negotiations seem unlikely to bear fruit in the future as well, as is highlighted by Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi’s repeated appeals to sidestep the border issue and continue bilateral ties as they were before the 2020 standoff.⁷³ China is

⁷⁰ “胡锡进评加勒万河谷冲突一周年:印度可以说是‘连本带息一起还了’” [Hu Xijin Commented on the First Anniversary of the Galwan Valley Conflict: India Has Supposedly “Repaid the Principle with Interest Together”], Sina, June 16, 2021, https://k.sina.com.cn/article_1887344341_707e96d5020013bkx.html.

⁷¹ Singh, “China’s Evolving Strategic Discourse on India.”

⁷² Zongyi Liu, “Boundary Standoff and China-India Relations: A Chinese Scholar’s Perspective,” *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 6, no. 2 (2020): 223–48.

⁷³ “Wang Yi Holds Talks with Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), Press Release, March 25, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/kjgzbdffyq/202203/t20220326_10656097.html.

unlikely to move past what it views as India's reversal of a tacit consensus in the 1990s on confidence-building measures that prioritized strategic cooperation while simultaneously working on the border issues without letting them hinder progress in other areas.⁷⁴

Moreover, despite a full-scale war having been averted, the current level of distrust between China and India is abysmal.⁷⁵ This is evidenced by the aforementioned increase in the number and intensity of conflicts in recent years, the military buildup along both sides of the border, and the lackluster progress toward a resolution of the dispute after several rounds of negotiations. The clash in Arunachal Pradesh in late 2022 is another testament to this growing mistrust, and the same can only be expected in the coming years, despite efforts to establish stabler ties. China's responses over the years have veered from invoking Asian solidarity and a sense of regional multilateral cooperation against what it regards as the U.S.-led Western fiefdom to warnings over India's "miscalculated" strategy.⁷⁶ However, China's apparent fickleness and persistent threat calculus have pushed India to pursue a pointed multi-alignment policy focused on the United States, various European countries, Australia, Vietnam, and Japan, among other partners. Such gambits have shown a paradoxical side to China-India ties: without trust, they are unable to bring peace to their boundary dispute, and yet to gain trust, peace along the boundary is needed first.

In the early years of his first term, Xi Jinping agreed to proactively resolve the border dispute "as early as possible."⁷⁷ Unfortunately, Xi's ascent has coincided with that of Indian strongman Narendra Modi. Since the beginning of his term, Modi has worked to rewrite India's diplomatic maneuvers by changing to a power-parity equation with China, rebuffing the Belt and Road Initiative, outlining the Security and Growth for All in the Region vision in an obvious tilt to the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific security architecture that endorses a "free and open Indo-Pacific," and, importantly, contributing to the resurgence of the Quad, which China views as a post-

⁷⁴ "China, India Agree on 'Strategic Partnership,'" Embassy of the PRC in India, April 2005, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cein//eng/ssygd/zygx/t191496.htm>.

⁷⁵ Sun, "China's Strategic Assessment of India."

⁷⁶ "Wang Yi: China and India Should Stick to Long-term Perspective, Win-Win Mentality and Cooperative Posture," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), Press Release, March 25, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202203/t20220326_10656095.html; and Long Xingchun, "India Flexing Its Muscles at the Border Shows Its Loser Mentality," *Global Times*, November 14, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1238931.shtml>.

⁷⁷ "Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India."

Cold War U.S. containment tool.⁷⁸ Moreover, India joined the U.S.-initiated Indo-Pacific Economic Framework while opting out (due to various reasons beyond China) of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which rankled China enough for the country to reiterate its open invitation to the RCEP.⁷⁹

Although the strategic discourse in China may diverge in some respects in its approach to India,⁸⁰ there is an overwhelming consensus that a rising, nationalistic, and assertive India is becoming central to the global and regional security architecture and a fear of the increasing cooperation between regional Indo-Pacific states (including India) and the United States, particularly now that South Korea has joined the U.S.-led security architecture by implementing its own Indo-Pacific strategy under President Yoon Suk-yeol. China has been referencing India's independent stance in the wake of the Ukraine war to highlight the need for the two countries to enhance cooperation based on common interests instead of undermining each other or letting border disputes overwhelm bilateral ties.⁸¹

In sum, China seems to be increasingly promoting tactical cooperation in the economic sphere and multilateral forums while employing intimidation tactics (both psychological and military) to prevent India from coalescing with the Western-led security architecture. This strategy is unlikely to change in the near future. The CCP, CMC, and by default the PLA are poised to remain focused on the China-India border in Xi's third term, especially as the centennial goal of building a modern military by 2027 steadily approaches. As the PRC's modernization of its defense forces continues, the border dispute with India is playing a key role in decision-making about the requirements for engaging in and defending contested regions. New Delhi must similarly speed up efforts to acquire new equipment and gain a tactical advantage in order to ably protect Indian sovereignty.

⁷⁸ Jagannath Panda, "Opinion: How the Quad Can Become More than an Anti-China Grouping," *Indian Express*, May 25, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/how-the-quad-can-become-more-than-an-anti-china-grouping-7934017>.

⁷⁹ Abhishek G. Bhaya, "Shangri-La Dialogue Sets Up Battle of Competing Security Visions for Asia-Pacific," *China's Diplomacy in the New Era*, http://en.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/2022-06/11/content_78265170.shtml.

⁸⁰ Singh, "China's Evolving Strategic Discourse on India."

⁸¹ "FM Meets Indian Ambassador, Says China, India 'Should Speak for Developing Countries Together,'" *Global Times*, June 23, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202206/1268905.shtml>.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter defines three types of cyber crisis that pose risks to China and assesses the agencies, authorities, and procedures that Chinese policymakers have developed to manage such crises.

MAIN ARGUMENT

China's increasing dependence on and presence in cyberspace raises the risk of three types of cyber crisis for Beijing. First, like all modern states, China must defend, detect, contain, and respond to a domestic cyberattack that could have widespread destructive or disruptive effects on its economy and society. Second, it must prepare and respond to a potential diplomatic and foreign policy crisis created by reactions to Chinese cyberoperations that fall below the threshold for the use of force or armed attack. Third, during any border or maritime crisis, Chinese cyberoperations will be conducted to collect intelligence and possibly to signal, coerce, and deter adversaries. Chinese policymakers must manage the use of cyber tools during any military or diplomatic crisis and ensure that they do not inadvertently lead to escalation or loss of control. China has been developing institutions, regulations, and processes that should improve its ability to manage these three types of crisis.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- While China has many new institutions and procedures to manage a domestic cyber crisis, the system's effectiveness during a cyber crisis remains unknown. Analogous experiences of crisis management suggest that China will struggle with the informal information flows and the public-private partnerships essential in the first stages of response.
- The worsening of the Sino-U.S. relationship makes the management of a political crisis provoked by Chinese cyberindustrial espionage significantly more difficult to control, but also less likely to happen. Both sides can be expected to accept cyberespionage as a constant in the relationship and are therefore less likely to react to the other's complaints or criticism of cyberoperations.
- China can be expected to conduct cyber intelligence operations during a crisis and may use more disruptive or destructive attacks for signaling, coercion, or deterrence. The nature of cyberspace and Chinese approaches to cyber complicate signaling and raise the risk that cyberoperations could exacerbate a crisis and provoke a kinetic response.

China's Military Decision-making in Times of Crisis and Conflict features papers from the 2022 People's Liberation Army Conference convened by the National Bureau of Asian Research, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's China Strategic Focus Group, and the Department of Foreign Languages at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. As competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China intensifies and unplanned encounters between their militaries become more frequent, what impact has Xi Jinping had on China's crisis decision-making and behavior? In what domains and against which actors may China be inclined to escalate or de-escalate a crisis? Leading experts address these questions and more in this volume and find that fundamentally different understandings and approaches to crisis management and response could make it more difficult to swiftly resolve crises.

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