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China and India: The Roots of Hostility

By Mohan Malik
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Up until the “disengagement agreement” of August 28 which led to withdrawal of Indian troops and an end to Chinese road construction in the disputed Doklam (Donglang in Chinese) plateau at the China-Bhutan-India tri-junction, China’s official media and spokespersons had unleashed a daily barrage of vitriol and warnings of an imminent “short and swift war” to teach India a “bitter lesson” and inflict “greater losses” than the Sino-Indian War of 1962.

Contending that Doklam was “Chinese territory,” Beijing’s media, along with its foreign affairs and defense spokespersons, demanded India’s unconditional withdrawal. New Delhi was adamant that road building was in violation of several bilateral agreements (agreements in 1988, 1998, and 2012 specifically) with Bhutan and India. To independent observers, Beijing’s behavior in the Himalayas seemed consistent with its incremental expansion of strategic frontiers by drawing new lines around China’s periphery in the land, air, water, sand, and snow. Troop mobilization along their disputed frontiers saw tempers running high, and for the first time since the 1987 Sumdorong Chu valley face-off, violent clashes occurred in the Ladakh sector. The confrontation was the worst in decades between Asia’s old rivals.

Thanks to a negotiated settlement on the eve of the BRICS Summit in China, the two-month Doklam standoff has ended in such a fashion as to allow the media in both countries to claim “victory.”

“If it wasn’t for the BRICS meeting happening so soon,” said Zhang Guihong, an India expert at Shanghai’s Fudan University, “the stand-off would have lasted much longer.”

Though a war has been averted, Beijing has not compromised on its sovereignty claims. As the entire Sino-Indian border from Kashmir to Burma remains undemarcated and unsettled, Zhao Gancheng, director of South Asian studies at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, believes that “it is unrealistic to expect China and India to have high political trust or to exclude the possibility of another incident.”

India’s army chief, General Bipin Rawat, agrees and cautions against complacency because Doklam-style encroachments are likely to “increase in the future.”

But two weeks after the standoff appeared to end, Indian and Chinese troops remain on the plateau, separated by 150 meters, according to Indian media reports. The reports also claim that Chinese troops have built bunkers on a ridge near the disputed area and there are concerns that the standoff could resume.

Neither side is going to lower its guard by pulling troops back too far. Reputational costs weigh heavily. New Delhi cannot abandon Bhutan — India’s only treaty ally in South Asia — to Beijing’s bullying and blandishments. For Beijing, the central message of India’s defiance — “China will stop only when it’s stopped” — could encourage further acts of defiance by other adversaries. Having been outmaneuvered and outwitted by Delhi, Beijing may seek to bolster its military capabilities in Doklam. Whether imperial or communist, China has a long history of lashing out at states that hurt its pride and interests. It seems the so-called Pacific Century may turn out to be just another hundred bloody years in Asia.

In fact, skirmishes and military face-offs have been a regular feature on their contested borders, rife with disputed histories. Numerous pacts and border management mechanisms established over the decades have failed to maintain peace and Asia’s giants have come close to fighting for a second round along their long, disputed Himalayan border at least once a decade since the late 1960s. Never close, a chill has descended on Sino-Indian ties in recent years over a whole range of issues including India’s membership in global institutions, territorial disputes, Pakistan-based terror groups, water, trade, maritime, and India’s public opposition to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, also ‘One Belt, One Road,’ or OBOR) as China embarked upon a path to regional hegemony.

From New Delhi’s perspective, China’s BRI narrative in a sense seeks to rewrite Asian history and shape Eurasia’s future without recognizing India’s historical, cultural, religious, and commercial links to the world. Thus, at a time when the whole world is China’s oyster, India is the only Asian country standing athwart China’s march to glory and greatness. Not surprisingly, the enemy most often spoken of in Beijing’s strategic circles today is India. The censors encourage alarmingly frank discussion of the merits of another war against India.

In particular, China has been concerned about India moving too close to the United States and Japan for Beijing’s comfort. From Beijing’s perspective, as long as India understands that China is the preeminent great power in Asia, and New Delhi keeps its subordinate place in the

hierarchy, both will enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship. However, should India challenge or aspire to emerge as China's equal or peer competitor — and to do so with help from Japan and the United States — then the entire gamut of contentious bilateral issues are open for review and recasting.

Convinced that India has opted for the latter course, the Chinese government has hardened its stance and unleashed a shrill media campaign against India. Not very accustomed to weaker powers pushing back, Chinese official statements have been among the most belligerent and contemptuous since the 1960s. China's defense ministry spokesman repeatedly called on India to "correct its mistakes and stop its provocations." This campaign — unusual in its sarcasm and ridicule of Indian aspirations with daily threats and warnings — has mobilized Chinese public support for punitive action against its southern rival at an appropriate time and place. It is worth remembering that several military stand-offs and skirmishes eventually culminated in the Sino-Indian War of 1962.

The periodic Himalayan standoffs have their origins in the deep-seated hostility and suspicion that China and India have for one another. My book *China and India: Great Power Rivals* argued that given the fundamental clash of interests rooted in their history, strategic cultures and geopolitics, the threat of another war is ever present. For Asia has never known both China and India growing strong simultaneously in such close proximity with overlapping spheres of influence. India perceives itself in southern Asia much as China has traditionally perceived itself in relation to eastern Asia — as the preeminent power. Both aspire to the same things at the same time on the same continental landmass and its adjoining waters. As their need for resources, markets and bases grows, Asia's rising powers are also increasingly running into each other in third countries. China's global clout is manifesting itself in a millennia-old sense of superiority in Chinese behavior as Beijing seeks to recast the world in its own image.

India's rise presents serious challenges to China. Their power rivalry and their self-images as natural great powers and centers of civilization drive them to support different countries and causes. Since India was never part of the Sinic world order, but a civilization-empire in and of itself, it remains genetically ill-disposed to sliding into China's orbit without resistance. It is the only Asian power that has long been committed to balancing China. Economic, military and demographic trends over the long term tend to favor India. Compared with the United States, Russia and Japan — all in relative decline, India is the only country whose power and influence vis-à-vis China is increasing over time. New economic prosperity and military strength is reawakening nationalist pride in India, which could bring about a clash with the Chinese, if not handled skillfully. The emergence of a democratic, but at-times chaotic, India as the fastest growing world economy undercuts "the China model" of development-without-democracy. Add to this mix India's growing military cooperation with the United States, Japan and Australia, and growing strategic ties with countries that fall within China's sphere of influence (Mongolia, South Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines and Myanmar). All of these "new irritants" reinforce Beijing's fears about India's growing role in the U.S.-led containment of China. Furthermore, Chinese diplomats have discerned a certain degree of assertiveness, confidence and arrogance in their Indian counterparts that was missing in the 1980s and 1990s. When Chinese and Indian leaders meet, there is little meeting of the minds.

Many analysts believe that growing power asymmetry, in particular Beijing's global economic clout, is the reason for Chinese derision and bellicosity toward India. However, I argue that the roots of Chinese hostility toward its southern rival are deep-seated and actually pre-date Beijing's acquisition of economic and military muscle. An understanding of Chinese perceptions of India insofar as they influence policy is important because the present tensions may or may not erupt in a hot war, but will surely make their cold war colder. These perceptions have led five successive generations of post-Mao Chinese leadership to contemplate "teach[ing] India a lesson again" at least once every decade since the 1962 War (Zhou Enlai in 1971, Deng Xiaoping in 1987, Jiang Zemin in 1999, Hu Jintao in 2009 and Xi Jinping in 2017).

India is "an artificial British creation"

Since Mao's days, Chinese leaders have entertained doubts about the historical authenticity of the Indian nation. They have shown contempt for India's great power ambitions, perceived their southern rival as a pawn in Western designs to contain China, and worried about the strategic ramifications of India's power with regard to Tibet's future. Official rhetoric of Asian solidarity or millennia-old civilizational bonds notwithstanding, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) stereotype of India is of a loathsome, backward neighbor that sold opium to China, sent soldiers to crush the Boxer rebellion, provided Sikh policemen for the pre-1949 international settlements in Shanghai, copied British parliamentary democracy, adopted English as its official language, gave refuge to the Dalai Lama and Tibetan "splittists," and, last but not least, pursued British India's expansionist policies. The 1962 War and the Sino-Pakistan military nexus helped to tilt the regional power balance in China's favor.

If anything, the gulf between the two countries — in terms of their perceptions, attitudes, and expectations of each other — has widened in recent years. Despite growing economic ties, there is little or nothing positive about India's history, economy, or society in Chinese school textbooks. Official media portrays India as "a backward country full of horrific stories." Amid reports of an Indian consumer boycott of Chinese goods, many Chinese netizens joked that they could find nothing produced by India that they could boycott. When he was vice-foreign minister, Wang Yi described India as "a tribal democracy whose long-term existence was far from a certainty."

Many Chinese analysts maintain that "India as a nation never really existed in history," and urge Beijing to remove an emerging security threat by initiating the balkanization of India into 20-30 independent states with the aid of friendly countries. A *Huanqiu* commentary on July 28, 2017, warned India not to mess with China: "China has the capacity to make each of India's northeastern states independent." Many believe that "China and India cannot really deal with each other harmoniously" because "there cannot be two Suns in the sky."

The opinion pieces in *Renmin Ribao*, *Xinhua*, *China Daily* and nationalistic *Global Times* provide invaluable insights into Chinese elite thinking on India. Some may argue that the war-mongering rhetoric is not representative of China's official policy and that sensational press articles represent the shrill voice of those who advocate a tougher line toward India. After all, similar commentaries have appeared against Japan, Vietnam, South Korea and the Philippines in the recent past. The most plausible explanation is that Chinese government encourages this

nationalistic outpouring to pressure New Delhi to comply with its demands. It also reflects a new consensus on hardline policy toward rising India. In short, there exists in the Chinese commentariat a deep distrust and dislike of India — with the converse also holding true.

“India cannot compete with China”

Another dominant Chinese belief is that there is more hype than substance to India’s rise, generated mostly by the Western media. While Indians benchmark themselves against China, the Chinese see their country as not just an Asian power but a global power on par with the United States while making disparaging comments about India’s “unrealistic and unachievable big power dreams” (*daguomeng*). Whilst China already struts the world stage as a superpower, India remains far behind in all indices of power. Official China loathes being spoken of in the same breath as India. India plays no part in the vision projected by Beijing of the 21st century as a Chinese one — albeit except as a junior partner. Given China’s growing global footprint and the West’s current disarray, Beijing feels no need to play the anti-West, Asian solidarity card, or make any concessions to keep India on its side. Traditionally, China has long looked at India merely as an upstart wannabe that likes to punch above its weight and needs to be constantly reminded of its place. Much of Beijing’s strategic penetration deep into South Asian and the Indian Ocean has clearly been at India’s expense. What irks the Chinese elite apparently is the international praise showered on India’s democratic model. China’s economy and military are both nearly five times the size of India’s. The Chinese contend that their economic success proves the superiority of “the China model.” The PLA judges the Indian military inferior to the Chinese in combat, logistics, equipment, and war-fighting capability.

Meanwhile, the potential emergence of India as an alternative pole worries Beijing. A main objective of China’s Asia policy is to prevent the rise of a rival to challenge its status as the Asia-Pacific’s sole “Middle Kingdom.” China’s strategic culture necessitates a distrust of strong, powerful neighbors and a preference for small, weak, and subordinate or client buffer states. Few, if any, of China’s strategic thinkers hold positive views of India for China’s future. India’s efforts to take counter-balancing measures are perceived as challenging and threatening in China. Much to China’s chagrin, India’s “Act East” policy and naval activism have encouraged many countries to “view India as a counterweight to China in Southeast Asia.” The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor to promote growth and connectivity proposed together by India and Japan has drawn negative media commentary for “trying to trip China’s OBOR.”

Those who see India’s rise as China’s “Thucydides Trap” favor nipping it in the bud before it’s too late. Others favor leveraging mistrust and conflict in relations between India and its smaller South Asian neighbors and engaging in long-term strategic competition to sap India’s will and prevent it from spreading its wings. Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative seeks to integrate Asia’s natural resources, markets, and bases into China’s national development strategy. Moderate voices who want Beijing to accommodate a rising India in order to leverage its economic growth and partner with it to build a multipolar world are often drowned out by more hawkish voices.

Chinese leaders seem confident that China’s growing economic and military might would eventually enable Beijing to re-establish a Sino-centric hierarchical order as the United States remains disoriented and Japan shrinks economically and demographically, while India is

subdued by Beijing's "all-weather relationships" with its South Asian neighbors. For Chinese diplomats and strategists, some *resistance* ("frictions" or "nuisances" from pesky neighbors, as *Global Times* put it) in China's march toward glory and greatness is to be expected, but resistance will eventually give way to *accommodation* followed by *reconciliation* on China's terms.

As such, the goal is to convince neighboring countries that the overall balance of power has shifted in Beijing's favor, and their long-term interests lie in cutting bilateral deals with China. The kowtowing of Filipino, Thai, Cambodian and Malaysian leaders vindicates this approach. Chinese officials openly talk of buying off smaller countries instead of invading them. Strategically-located countries with resources, markets and naval bases are usually the largest recipients of Chinese largesse. Whether imperial, nationalist or communist, the aim of Chinese policy has been that neighbors must be respectful, obedient, and in areas immediately adjacent to the Chinese lands, preferably impotent and sufficiently weak. Overawed by China's growing wealth and power, India and other Chinese neighbors are expected to acquiesce to China's primacy and accept Beijing as their "benevolent big brother." Those who seek to contain China by banding together or aligning with the United States and allies would invariably incur Beijing's wrath. The policy of using territorial disputes to seek subservience creates contradictions that lead Beijing to support the 1890 Qing-British Treaty that demarcated borders with Sikkim and Tibet but to oppose the 1914 Simla Convention, to uphold the watershed principle on the Sikkim boundary demarcation but oppose it on the China-India border in Arunachal Pradesh.

Xi's Dream: China as Number One

Last but not least, China has always seen itself as a superior, unrivaled civilization-state. The CCP leadership consciously conducts itself as the heir to China's imperial legacy, often employing the symbolism and rhetoric of empire. From primary school textbooks to television historical dramas, the state-controlled media has force-fed generations of Chinese a diet of nationalist bluster and imperial China's grandeur. One lesson Chinese school textbooks teach is that "strength leads to expansion and weakness to contraction." That is why Beijing no longer feels constrained by bilateral or multilateral pacts or treaties that it signed on to "when China was weak." A common refrain is that "other countries need to 'get used to' its assertive posture and Chinese maritime forays, whether they like it or not." So "history" battles over territorial disputes are essentially about the future of regional order: Pax Sinica versus Pax Americana. Beijing's assessment of the United States as being distracted internally, and weakened diplomatically, has emboldened Chinese leadership to be aggressive. In the past six months alone, Beijing has threatened war with Vietnam, the Philippines, and India. As Martin Jacques puts it: "Imperial Sino-centrism shapes and underpins modern Chinese nationalism." The CCP's version of history — a benign and benevolent China at the center of Asia — commanding obeisance from less civilized is imagined, self-serving version, and constructed to serve the Party's domestic legitimacy and foreign policy goals.

Hyper-nationalism, a belief in Han exceptionalism, and of the inevitability of a post-American Sino-centric world now shape Beijing's India policy. Chinese leaders are cautious but also known risk-takers. And the PLA's proclivity to tolerate risk on the border with India is much

greater. As in the late 1950s, rising India is once again being viewed by PLA generals as an ambitious power with whom China may have to have a day of reckoning. Chinese strategic thinkers feel that a limited war with India would send a resounding message to those who are again courting and counting on India as a balancer or counterweight to China in the 21st century. The demonstrative effect of a short and swift victory over India would buttress the need for other Asian countries to accommodate China's growing power by aligning with, rather than against China. Instead of challenging China, Indian leaders will then be much more deferential. Even more tantalizing is the prospect of several weak and warring states in South Asia — all vying for Chinese aid and support.

In short, even though neither side wants a war, small skirmishes ending in a military confrontation due to miscalculation or hubris cannot be completely ruled out. Short of a hot war, Beijing could make the line of actual control (LAC) as “hot” as India's line of control (LOC) is with Pakistan. For the foreseeable future, the China-India cold war will continue to be characterized by incursions, tensions and scuffles, interspersed with endless talks until both sides work out new rules of engagement and mechanisms to enforce them.