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Tension grows between China and India as Asia slips into cold war

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You have to go to a tropical paradise to find the latest front in the brewing cold war between China and India.

On the southernmost tip of the Maldives lies the island of Gan, a tiny patch of coconut palms and powdery white beaches. It was here that Britain set up a secret naval base in 1941, building airstrips and vast fuel tanks to support its fleet in the Indian Ocean during the Second World War.

The RAF then used it as a Cold War outpost until 1976, when the British withdrew and the officers' quarters were converted into a resort called Equator Village.

Now, 33 years later, India is preparing to reopen the base to station surveillance aircraft, helicopters, and possibly ships, to monitor Chinese vessels in the Indian Ocean. Under a deal signed in August, India is also installing radar across the Maldives, linked to its coastal command.

Both countries publicly deny that the move is aimed at Beijing, but privately admit that it is a direct response to China's construction of a giant port at Hambantota in nearby Sri Lanka.

The plan is also being seen as the latest move in a low-level, but escalating struggle for economic and military supremacy between Asia's two emerging giants. This week the flashpoint is their disputed Himalayan border, as China protests over the Dalai Lama's visit to a northeastern Indian state that it claims. But they are also competing over naval control of the Indian Ocean, resources and markets in Africa, strategic footholds in Asia — and are even in a race for the Moon.

"It doesn't have the same proportions as the Cold War," said Alexander Neill, head of the Asia programme at the Royal United Services Institute, a research centre. "But there is

potential for this to spiral out of control. Allies of both countries need to think carefully about the consequences of this rivalry.”

Relations were cordial for the first decade after India’s independence in 1947, and the founding of communist China in 1949. They quickly deteriorated, however, when the Dalai Lama escaped from Tibet in 1959 and was granted refuge in India. China then humiliated India in 1962 when its troops briefly occupied the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh and seized the region of Aksai Chin. Beijing also began to provide aid and weapons to Pakistan — India’s rival.

In the past decade, the frost had been thawing as bilateral trade expanded from \$3 billion in 2000 to \$51 billion last year — the two even began joint military exercises.

Yet this year, things have taken a sudden turn for the worse as China seeks to project its economic and military clout, and a more assertive India tries to respond. Militarily, India frets over China’s recent efforts to improve infrastructure around its frontiers and force a compromise on the disputed border. It also worries about China’s plans to develop a “blue water” navy capable of protecting trade routes through distant waters, including the Indian Ocean.

India feels particularly threatened by China’s “string of pearls” strategy, building ports in Burma, Sri Lanka and Pakistan that could be used by its navy. Beijing is concerned that a nuclear deal finalised last year between India and the US, was designed as a counterbalance to China. The deal not only lifted a ban on India buying US nuclear supplies, it also opened the door for India to take part in joint military exercises and buy billions of dollars of US weaponry.

“Since 1962, I think Chinese strategists have basically decided that they can deal with India on their own terms,” said Evan Feigenbaum of the Council on Foreign Relations, an American research centre. “But when you introduce the United States into that equation, it introduces all kinds of uncertainties. I think we’re in for a period of India-China tension.”

Economically, the competition is most intense in Africa, where India and China are vying for resources and markets in a rerun of the “Scramble for Africa” by colonial powers.

China began courting African nations a decade ago, offering investment and trade in exchange for soft loans and development aid with no political conditions attached. But India is catching up fast, pledging \$5 billion in credit and hundreds of millions of dollars in financial help at an inaugural India-Africa summit last year. At stake is not just access to industrial raw materials, but support for India’s bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, which China opposes. India is also trying to make up lost ground in South, South-East and Central Asia.