

**Abhay Kumar Singh**



# **India-China Rivalry: Asymmetric No Longer**

**An Assessment of China's  
Evolving Perceptions of India**



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KW Publishers Pvt Ltd  
New Delhi



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Website: [www.idsa.in](http://www.idsa.in)

ISBN 978-93-91490-01-0 Hardback

Published in India by Kalpana Shukla



KW Publishers Pvt Ltd  
4676/21, First Floor, Ansari Road  
Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002  
Phone: +91 11 43528107  
Marketing: [kw@kwpub.in](mailto:kw@kwpub.in)  
Editorial: [production@kwpub.in](mailto:production@kwpub.in)  
Website: [www.kwpub.in](http://www.kwpub.in)

Printed and bound in India

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This book is dedicated to  
*Basundhara and Shwetank,*  
twin pillars of my strength



# Acknowledgement

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The African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child”, very aptly describes the journey of this from a very tentative hypothesis to its final shape. This book would not have been possible without the encouragement and support from my mentors, colleagues and friends.

I am profoundly thankful to Ambassador Sujan Chinoy, Director General, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDS) for constant guidance and encouragement. This research has greatly benefitted from his incisive insights and erudite scholarship. His intellectual brilliance, wise counsel and gracious support proved critical in the successful conclusion of this project. I also thank Maj Gen Bipin Bakshi (Retd), Deputy Director-General for all his support in my venture.

I have been privileged to have the opportunity to work with scholars and colleagues at MP-IDS who are not only brilliant intellectuals but also the nicest person. This research has been enriched by their frank critique, suggestions and sage advice. I am grateful for their support and scholarship. Critical insights of colleagues from the Military Centre and East Asia Centre of MP-IDS has been of immense help in this research.

Late Dr Kalyanraman deserves a special mention. His untimely demise, due to Covid, was a huge personal loss. As a friend, mentor and guide, he was my sounding board and ‘go-to person’ in case of any doubt or query. On every occasion when I needed help or advice, he dropped his work to give me his undivided attention, honest criticism, sound advice and clear judgement. I cannot thank him enough for his constant encouragement and guidance during this project.

Dr Prashant Kumar Singh and Sam Rajiv deserve credit for reviewing a multitude of rough drafts. I remain grateful for their wise counsel and advice. Dr MS Partibha has been of immense help in translating and contextualising Chinese language sources. Rakshit Mohan, a brilliant young scholar, deserves a special mention for very patiently reviewing my initial draft and I thank him for his very useful comments and suggestions.

A big thanks to Col Vivek Chadha, Shruti Pandlai and Dr Adil Rashid for putting up with my whine, self-doubt and pre-publication jitters. Their kind words of encouragement provided the critical nudge to complete this manuscript.

Thanks are also due to Ambassador Jayant Prasad and Maj Gen Alok Deb (Retd) for their immense faith in me and also for their indispensable support during the initial phase of this research project. Many more friends and colleagues have helped turn the initial premise into a coherent argument, directly or otherwise and I can only hope that this book measures up to their expectation. Despite all the support from my colleagues and friends, this manuscript is far from perfect and I alone am responsible for every imperfection.

The library staff of MP-IDSA has always been prompt with their help and this would have been a much poorer manuscript without their support. Pitamber Dutt and his team have often gone out of their way to locate reference materials from the library and even beyond. I cannot thank them enough.

This book has immensely benefitted from comments from external reviewers. My sincere thanks to Vivek Kaushik for steering reviewing process and also for coordinating the publication of this manuscript. A big thanks to Ms Jasminder Maolankar for her meticulous copy editing. I have greatly appreciated her counsel during the final stages of completing this manuscript. Kudos to the highly professional team at KW Publishers Pvt Ltd for their efforts in taking the project to its logical conclusion.

Finally, I must acknowledge that this book would not have been possible without unwavering and essential support from my wife Basundhara and my son Shwetank. They have always been my

biggest fan and sharpest critique. This book is the result of their love, generosity and honest feedback. With immense love and gratitude, I dedicate this book to them.



# 1. Introduction

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On June 15, 2020, the Galwan River Valley in Ladakh witnessed a pitched brawl between Indian and Chinese troops. In the melee, at least 20 Indian soldiers and an unconfirmed number of Chinese troops were killed in hand-to-hand combat with stones and clubs, some even wrapped with barbed wire.<sup>1</sup> While differing perceptions of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) demarcating the boundary had led to scuffles between troops from both sides even earlier, the Galwan clash marked the deadliest boundary clash since 1975.<sup>2</sup> These previous scuffles were invariably resolved in accordance with existing agreements between the two countries. However, the context of the Galwan clash was the Chinese attempt to unilaterally alter the status quo of the LAC by capturing key territories at multiple locations of the un-demarcated boundary. Since May 2020, there had been troop mobilisation on an unprecedented scale by the Chinese, triggering counter-mobilisation by India in response.<sup>3</sup> Through the existing mechanism of dialogue between local commanders, both sides agreed for a reciprocal disengagement. However, Chinese troops violated the extant consensus by attacking an Indian army patrol verifying the disengagement process, leading to the deadly clash.

The unresolved boundary issue between India and China has remained a key source of friction between the two countries from the beginning and was the *casus belli* of the 1962 war. While there were CBMs in place to avoid escalation of differences of perception on the boundary issue into a dispute, both countries had barely managed to step back from the precipice during the tense 73-day-long standoff at Doklam in 2017. In order to repair the strained ties and reverse an environment of declining trust, there was an attempt

by India to reset ties through informal summits at Wuhan in April 2018 and at Mamallapuram in August 2019. Notwithstanding the consensus reached between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping to ensure stable and balanced relations between India and China, Beijing's belligerence to escalate the boundary dispute during the Coronavirus pandemic has indeed been puzzling. India's Foreign Minister S Jaishankar conceded that there are some differences in perceptions on the LAC. However, given the existing arrangement of addressing contentious challenges, he confirmed that "we have very large number of Chinese forces [on the border] and frankly, we are at a loss to know why."<sup>4</sup>

Post the Galwan clash, both sides further strengthened their forward deployed troops and bolstered their tactical positions by occupying heights and ridges. In the ensuing tactical manoeuvres, both sides also accused each other of firing warning shots in violation of the Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) on avoidance of use of firearms during a standoff. Notwithstanding continuing dialogue at the diplomatic and military levels, including discussions between the ministers of defence and foreign affairs, a state of tense brinkmanship existed for nearly ten months with fully mobilised troops from both countries in eyeball-to-eyeball contact.

On 11 February 2021, both countries announced an agreement for disengagement on the north and south bank of Pangong Tso and to cease their forward deployments in a "phased, coordinated and verified manner".<sup>5</sup> While the mutual disengagement by Indian and Chinese forces from north and south bank of Pangong Tso was completed between 10-19 February 2021, modalities for disengagement from other friction points in Ladakhs—viz. Depsang Plains, Hot Springs-Gogra and Demchok—still remains under discussion. The 21st meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) was held on 12 March 2021 and it reiterated the commitment of both sides to continue negotiations for disengagement from remaining areas.<sup>6</sup>

The complex trajectory of the India-China relationship has always retained a sense of uncertainty. Despite efforts to normalise bilateral dynamics through diplomatic and economic engagement, recurrent

tensions seem to be a feature of India-China relations. Lurking beneath a veneer of normalcy, there exists a mutual perception of insecurity, strategic mistrust and an unresolved boundary dispute.<sup>7</sup> In addition, new sources of tension emerged as both countries aspire to be major regional and global powers. These sources include trade imbalance, competition for resources and influence in distant regions of the world, a nascent maritime competition and a latent contest for primacy in Asia and on the world stage.<sup>8</sup>

It is often argued that India-China relations over nearly seven decades represent the classic case of an ‘enduring rivalry’ driven by ‘security dilemma’.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding the Doklam standoff, some commentators are of the opinion that the India-China rivalry is not as intense as it was in the sixties and seventies. It has also been observed that there has been a ‘diminution of hostility between the two sides in the last two or three decades,’ since both sides recognise the advantages of growing economic co-operation; the existing status quo on the boundary issue being generally acceptable to both sides; and the existence of an effective mechanism for conflict management along the border.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, there is also a view that while some of the new sources of bilateral tension due to China’s growing assertiveness has been increasing, the India-China bilateral dynamics remain a ‘managed rivalry’ with both sides making efforts to “avoid sudden strategic choices which would aggravate into the conflict.”<sup>11</sup>

Why China decided to initiate this dangerous brinkmanship against India and what were its objectives and the desired end state at the strategic and operational level are questions that continue to puzzle sinologists and strategic commentators, both in India and around the world. Various hypotheses about possible reasons of extant border standoff include President Xi Jinping’s attempt to divert domestic attention from the COVID-19 mismanagement,<sup>12</sup> Beijing’s increased sensitivity to questions of sovereignty during the pandemic,<sup>13</sup> a response to India’s construction of roads and airstrips adjacent to the LAC,<sup>14</sup> India’s abolition of Article 370,<sup>15</sup> dissuading India from becoming a close partner of the US<sup>16</sup> and teaching an assertive India a lesson by defeating it militarily.<sup>17</sup>

While a firm assessment of the proximate cause of the ongoing border standoff will have to wait for a comprehensive historical enquiry sometime in the future, the important question to explore at this stage is whether China made a ‘sudden strategic choice’ to escalate the boundary issue or was it a result of a progressive accumulation of China’s perceived grievances over a period of time. In other words, whether differing perceptions of disputed boundary is the ‘cause’ of growing strategic distrust between the two countries or is it a ‘symptom’ of the multitude of geopolitical issues shaping dyadic rivalry.

### **Chinese Perceptions of India—An Underexplored Dimension of India-China Dynamics?**

In recent years, since the bilateral dynamics between India and China, whether cooperative or competitive, could potentially impact the evolving geopolitical order in the region and even beyond there has been growing interest in deciphering the nature and contours of bilateral dynamics between the two rising powers. As a result, there has been a substantial proliferation in academic and policy-oriented research that explores various dimensions of the India-China dynamics and its evolving contours in the past three decades.

Given this context, a profound but rather paradoxical observation of Rory Medcalf about the current scholarship on India-China dynamics seems intriguing. Contrary to conventional wisdom, he argues that “the relationship between India and China has long been one of the most understudied great power complexes in international affairs.”<sup>18</sup> He highlights that a majority of English-language scholarship on India-China relations rely on assessments of Western and Indian scholars and that there is a paucity of literature presenting the Chinese perspective on India. This deficiency in contemporary scholarship has been noted by others as well. Even before Medcalf, Shaun Randol noted that “the examinations and analyses of the Chinese perceptions of India in today’s academic literature centring on geopolitical perceptions are few, especially in the English language.” She argues the absence of intuitive mental and emotional images—which Chinese intellectuals hold toward

India—has left a gap in the holistic understanding of India-China dynamics. Tien-Sze Fang has also highlighted this sparseness of Chinese perspectives in English language literature on India-China relations.<sup>19</sup>

This gap is problematic given the strategic rivalry being the prominent characteristic of India-China dynamics. DS Rajan states that “China’s perceptions of India have remained and continue to be a key factor in the matter of understanding Beijing’s overall policy approach towards New Delhi at any given time; it goes without saying that a correct appraisal would provide a solid ground to the analysts of the subject, more importantly to the authorities in India responsible for making China policy.” He also notes that the realisation of this task is not going to be easy.<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, Toshi Yoshihara mentions that “there is no shortage of Western commentaries about Chinese intentions and capabilities in the Indian Ocean. But few have tapped China’s vast open-source literature to discern patterns in Chinese thinking about India and the Indian Ocean. This is a glaring gap, especially in light of the explosive growth in Chinese scholarship on India.”<sup>21</sup>

Before moving further, a brief theoretical detour would be necessary in order to highlight the relevance of perception and cognitive images in international relations and foreign policies. Robert Jervis has highlighted perception as a key variable in analysing international politics and foreign policies. Through a dynamic psychosocial process—driven by the decision maker’s perception—a state categorises other states as friends, rivals and enemies. Actors interpret the intentions of others based on past behaviour and on forecasts about the future behaviour of these other actors.<sup>22</sup>

The setting of the interactive paradigm between states is considered to be a function of perceptions, beliefs and images. Image theorists posit that a state’s perceptions about other actors in world affairs are shaped by its assessment of the target nation’s motives, leadership and primary characteristics, which get distilled into group schemas or images with well-defined cognitive elements. These schematics or images comprising cognitions and beliefs regarding images, perceptions or stereotypes are significant in

international relations as they “serve to justify a nation’s desired reaction or treatment toward another nation.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, a country’s foreign policy approach towards the other country is shaped by a set of beliefs or schema of images that usually define and shape a specific policy course. Image theory suggests that ideas and cognition about other actors in world affairs are formed through an assessment of relative material capability, intentions and whether another actor is perceived as a threat or opportunity. These mental and emotional images progressively evolve as a stereotype that persists for a long time,<sup>24</sup> and are re-assessed only in response to significant changes in political, military and economic ‘interaction capacity’ of the target state. Manjeet Pardesi states that “strategic rivalry is a process that initiates when the central decision-makers of a dyad ascribe the image of an enemy to the other as a consequence of such changes.”<sup>25</sup>

Renaud Egreteau is of the opinion that the conceptual framework of ‘Enduring International Rivalry (EIR)’ has three key characteristic elements: “a critical factor (the need for dyadic ‘crises’ or disputes); a temporal factor (the historicization of these crises, and the learning processes made by policymakers); a psychological factor (the mutual distrust and the threat perceptions defined, which influence policies, sometimes beyond rationality).”<sup>26</sup> He says that an ‘enduring rivalry’ has been in play between India and China since the late 1940s due to the presence of these key characteristics in India-China dyadic interactions, which include competing ideological and strategic agendas, strong perceptual gaps and cultural mistrust, and above all a territorial dispute that remains unsettled despite several border clashes and a series of negotiations. Similarly, two major studies on the nature and contours of India-China rivalry, based on the compilation of Militarised Interstate Dispute (MID), have argued that the existence uninterrupted (enduring) rivalry between India and China from 1948 onwards contains both spatial (territory) and positional (status) attributes.<sup>27</sup> While the majority of the literature on India-China relations is sharply focussed on evolving patterns of critical and temporal factors in the bilateral dynamics, the psychological factors have remained underexplored.

It would not be correct to state that the Chinese perspective on India-China rivalry has not been examined, instead the key contention is whether it has been adequately explored. John Graver's seminal work *Protracted Contest* has comprehensively explored the evolution of India-China dynamics from the time of their advent as nation states in the 1940s. Garver's book provides expansive reviews of the relevant factors, which, among others, include the Tibet issue, the China-Pakistan axis and the emerging maritime dimension of rivalry unfolding in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. However, a closer scrutiny of his book reveals that while there are some perceptual insights about the Chinese perspective, his analysis is largely based on Indian viewpoints.<sup>28</sup>

Drawing from Chinese Archival Sources, Amitabh Acharya in his book *Sino-Indian Encounters in South East Asia* provides some critical insights about the Chinese perspective on the India-China competitive approach for regional dominance in Southeast Asia in the 1950s.<sup>29</sup> The Chinese perspective on India-China relations in the 1950s, the India-China boundary disputes and events leading to 1962 have been comprehensively explored in numerous historical research, which to some extent outline an intuitive mental and emotional image of India in China's eyes.<sup>30</sup> Given the near absence of adversarial relations in their civilisational existence of more than millennia,<sup>31</sup> broad arguments posit that a sense of security dilemma came into existence only during the late fifties, which progressively intensified during a series of avoidable brinkmanship, resulting in a brief war in 1962. Accordingly, existing literature portrays the 1962 war as a seminal event in the initiation of strategic rivalry.

In the aftermath of 1962, in the Indian psyche there has been an enduring image of China as a rival; however, evolving patterns of Chinese perceptions towards India have not been sufficiently explored. The heuristic contention in the scholarship on India-China relations indicates a broad indifference and even disdain in the Chinese attitude towards India till the 1980s. India's rising economic and strategic profile in the 1990s provided a context for a re-evaluation of India-China dynamics. Bonnie Glaser has noted a nascent perception of Chinese maritime insecurity due to threat

from India to its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean.<sup>32</sup> India's nuclear test in 1998 and more so the contention that its nuclear capability was a mitigating response to the Chinese threat has been highlighted as a systemic perturbation in India-China dynamics. Notwithstanding immediate polemical outbursts from China, India-China relations returned to normalcy after a brief hiatus.

In the new millennium, the simultaneous rise of India and China came to define 21st century Asia, and the nature of their bilateral interactions became a key feature in understanding the future of Asia. Within this context, academic exploration in India-China dynamics suddenly proliferated on two parallel tracks. Driven by imperatives of economic interdependence, as evidenced by growing trade between India and China, one thread of analysis focussed on economic potentialities between the two states. The convergence of views between the two countries on systemic issues plaguing emerging powers on trade and developmental assistance along with commonality of views towards multipolarity in the global geopolitical discourse resulted in various explorations about a cooperative future as a Dragon-Elephant tango. On the other hand, there exist numerous empirical examinations of China and India's economic, political and military capabilities in order to compare and contrast their relative progress and future potential. Analytical discourses about India-China relations have travelled along these parallel tracks. Changing dynamics in India-China relations have been explained either through geopolitical or economic frames of references with projections pointing towards either an eventual military clash or a vision of an economic melding of the two economies as 'Chindia'.

Some of the literature on India-China relations that focusses on the Chinese perception towards India began to discern a noticeable shift from 1998 onward.<sup>33</sup> India's rise has challenged some long-held stereotypes of India. The stereotypical image of India as poor and unstable as a result of a noisy democracy when compared and contrasted with a prosperous and orderly China has served as a useful explanation to convince China's domestic audience about

inherent economic and societal benefits of an authoritarian regime. In the new millennium, India's remarkable economic growth and particularly burgeoning IT industry have begun to impress the Chinese.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Chinese scholars have evaluated the implications of India's growing strategic profile and accretion in military power. According to Lora Saalman, "From 2000 onward, China not only intensified its attention towards India but also began to accord it greater significance." She highlighted a noticeable spurt in Chinese academic literature about India's military modernisation from 1993 onwards. In addition, she also points towards a trend in Chinese scholars shifting their specialisation towards India.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Toshi Yoshihara, appreciating the remarkable productivity of Chinese scholarship on India, highlighted that China's international relations scholars have produced 20 books and an astounding 2,000 research papers and monographs on India between 1994 and 2008. He argues that the Chinese are clearly watching India and it behoves on other strategic experts to analyse their perspectives.<sup>36</sup>

An insightful analysis of the Chinese perspective on India after India's 1998 nuclear test has been provided in Sidhu and Yuhan's book *China and India: Cooperation or Conflict?* Their analysis, drawn from views and perspectives of Indian and Chinese civilian and military scholars, has highlighted some key aspects of India-China dynamics, which, among others, include mutual threat perceptions, US-India-China dynamics and regional security and domestic influences.<sup>37</sup> Mohan Malik has also comprehensively explored the evolving contours of the Chinese perspective about India in his book *Great Power Rivals* and is of the opinion that despite burgeoning economic and political links, China and India continue to harbour strong hostility and mutual suspicions about one another.<sup>38</sup> He has recently revisited his thesis and states that the steady emergence of India as a powerful player in the regional and global geopolitics is not looked upon favourably by Beijing.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Jeff Smith in his book *Cold Peace* has explored new insights on India-China dynamics through analyses of Chinese, Indian and US perspectives.<sup>40</sup>

The predominant view in contemporary literature characterises India-China rivalry as 'asymmetric' and some have even argued

this to be an ‘one-sided rivalry.’<sup>41</sup> Characterisation of India-China dynamics as an ‘asymmetric’ or ‘one-sided’ rivalry is primarily driven by three basic contentions. First, while India considers China as a major threat, Beijing does not take India seriously. Second, India is weaker than China and the gap in capabilities between them is growing in favour of China. Third, India considers China as a ‘principal rival’ or the most serious security threat, while Beijing claims India as a third-tier security priority behind domestic and external challenges in the East Asian littorals. Alternately, this notion of asymmetric rivalry has been contested by others.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, it has also been observed that notwithstanding the relative gap in strategic power and the overt display of a dismissive attitude towards India, Beijing has always factored India in its security calculus and has remained concerned with India’s ability to undermine China’s territorial interests and regional ambitions.<sup>43</sup>

Unarguably, power asymmetry, with substantial Chinese advantage, has been a persistent characteristic of India-China relations and is likely to remain or even grow further. India, being weaker in this dyad, naturally has a greater threat perception vis-à-vis China. According to C Raja Mohan, “Many Sinologists point to the formal arguments in Beijing that it sees no threat from India and says that the notion of ‘relentless rivalry’ is more in New Delhi’s strategic imagination.” While this may not be without basis given the existing asymmetry in power, he argues that as India expands its defence capabilities and deepens its engagement with China’s potential adversaries, Beijing has begun to factor New Delhi into its strategic calculus.<sup>44</sup> The core problem in the asymmetric rivalry hypothesis is the premise that does not take into account the evolutionary trend in the Chinese perception towards India.

As highlighted earlier, Shaun Randol’s primary research on the Chinese perception of India—with perceptions defined as ‘the emotional and mental images’—noted that India remained firmly on Beijing’s scholars and policymakers’ radar. However, India’s geopolitical image in the Chinese perception is still evolving with India being described variously as a ‘friend’ and ‘partner’ and not

described as ‘enemy/rival’ in realist sense but as a potential threat in future.<sup>45</sup> Selina Ho has explored this further by identifying a persistent attitude and a perceptual shift in the Chinese perception about India. She states that China’s relations with India are undergoing a period of transition and policy adjustment towards India is being driven by shifts in China’s emotional and mental image of India. She argues that “China’s current view of India is caught between its traditional low regard of India and the image of a rising India with the capacity to affect China’s regional and international interests.”<sup>46</sup> There still exists a high degree of ambivalence and substantial contradiction in China’s emotional and mental images of India, which is in sharp contrast to the relatively clear-cut Chinese perception about the US and Japan, who are seen as major powers with the potential to block China’s rise.

This underexplored dimension of the Chinese perception about India is even more pronounced in the Indian strategic discourse, which seems to be largely dependent on easily available Western interpretations and analyses of China. The need for indigenisation of India’s assessments and initiatives in the contemporary debate on a rising China has been emphasised by Swaran Singh, and he says that “how the Western world reads China will not be the same as how Indians do it.”<sup>47</sup> Ironically, his own exploration about the relevance of perception, problems and potential in India-China relations is more about discourse and debate about China in India than about Chinese perceptions of India. Similar to China watchers across the globe, Indian scholarship on India-China relations can also be classified into three categories of constructivists with forward-looking views of cooperative coexistence; realists who view China as a major threat to India; and pragmatist perceptions of competitive coexistence. Unarguably, the realist views about China are more pronounced in the broader strategic discourse while the narrative in the policy circles reflects a varying combination of a pragmatic and constructive approach. However, within these three broad threads of analytical views often what is missing is a critical appraisal about the evolving China’s mental and emotional image of India. Among the literature reviewed, DS Rajan’s book chapter on ‘Chinese perception

of India' has attempted to highlight the contemporary image of India in the eyes of China. He discerns two distinct threads in the Chinese assessment of India. While Chinese official discourses on India are generally warm and restrained, Chinese strategic debates about India remain rooted in the realpolitik of hard realism. He has argued that what the party and state-controlled media, scholars of strategic think tanks and some retired military officers say about India cannot be ignored since they also represent China's voice.<sup>48</sup> Recent writing of Vijay Gokhale and Antara Ghosal Singh has begun to include Chinese perceptions and contemporary image of India.<sup>49</sup> This research aims to explore this lines of enquiry further.

### **Complex Task of Reading Chinese Tea Leaves**

Identifying gaps in the contemporary scholarship about lack of Chinese perceptions about India and noticing the absence of a Chinese perspective in the Indian scholarship was an easy task, which clearly emerged during the preliminary literature review while researching for this book. The reasons for this apparent gap became progressively clear as the research progressed. There are very few strategic analysts who are familiar with the Chinese language and most of these sinologists focus either on Sino-US dynamics or on broader geopolitical implications of China's rise at the global and regional level. India-China dynamics at best remain a secondary focus of their work. In so far as Indian scholarship on China is concerned, Jabin T Jacob argues that "strategic and security affairs is not really a preoccupation of the majority of Chinese scholars in India who actually speak and read Chinese. In any case, this community is tiny." This could be a probable cause of the predominance of easily available Western interpretations and analyses in the Indian strategic discourse about China.

While it is generally understood that the US government devotes significant effort to understand Chinese perceptions, the limitation of the effort became apparent in a study conducted by the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission "to provide empirical evidence on the messages and tone of Chinese reporting on the United States over time."<sup>50</sup> The Commission highlighted

that the “U.S. Government has dedicated insufficient resources to collect, translate, and analyse Chinese writings and statements. Consequently, it has a limited understanding of the perceptions of the United States held by Chinese leaders and the Chinese people.” The Commission’s findings are indeed perplexing given the quantum of intellectual and technological resources employed by the US government institutions in the collection, translation and analysis of Chinese strategic literature through government agencies, academic universities and think tanks. If the US finds it challenging to unravel the enigma of Chinese perceptions, the challenges involved in deciphering contours of the Chinese perception about India would be rather unsurmountable.

In addition to linguistic constraint, a more serious obstacle in the holistic assessment of Chinese perception, in general, relates to the level of bureaucratic process in China that strictly regulates information flow to the outside world.<sup>51</sup> According to Michael Pillsbury, “China’s leaders devoted tremendous time and energy to controlling the message inside China in a way that would directly influence foreign perceptions of China.”<sup>52</sup>

Garver has noted a sharp distinction between open (*gongkai*) and closed (*neibu*) publications. The closed (*neibu*) publications are carefully distributed through restricted channels on a need-to-know basis and aim to convey an unvarnished and frank assessment on issues to cadre and party officials. He has highlighted that most of the research products of the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) and China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) are distributed via non-public, internal distribution networks to China’s decision-makers. Openly disseminated (*gongkai*) sources aim to explain the rationale of government policies and articulate a clear party line to be followed. He has also argued that the Chinese open source literature on India indicates a clear emphasis to downplay Indian threats to China and emphasise Beijing’s policy objective of ‘friendship and cooperation’ towards India on the basis that neither side constitutes a threat to the other. He opines that “it is quite possible, however, that internal publications convey more realistic, more pessimistic, more conflict-oriented analyses.”<sup>53</sup>

This approach is not peculiar to India-China dynamics, similar methodology—downplaying threat and emphasising friendship and cooperation—has been noted by Michael Pillsbury in the case of US-China relations as well.<sup>54</sup>

Notwithstanding these structural constraints, there has been a noticeable increase in English scholarship in China in the past three decades, especially in social science, international relations and law. Prominent think tanks in China have begun to publish their peer-reviewed journals in bilingual formats. Chinese scholars are also increasingly contributing to international journals. Similarly, Social Sciences Academic Press of China has begun to publish its books in English through collaborations with international publishing houses. Xie Shouguang, President, Social Science Academic Press has explained this as an effort to remove the language barrier impediment to efforts by academia, business communities, and policymakers in other countries to form a thorough understanding of contemporary China.

It is pertinent to highlight that in its quest for status and influence, the dissemination of the Chinese perspective in English and other languages has been an integral part of China's soft power strategy. This focussed approach towards the development of soft power seems to have begun in 1993 in order to counteract the 'China threat' theory that was gaining prominence in global strategic discourse due to China's assertive behaviour in the South China dispute.<sup>55</sup> Through the employment of soft power, Beijing wants to disabuse the notion that China constitutes a threat to others and seeks to convey a peaceful image of China. Beijing's efforts to mobilise soft power has been hindered, to a large extent, due to dissonance and inconsistencies between China's messages and its actions. Be that as it may, Chinese English language scholarship in international relations and geopolitics has certainly opened a new avenue for assessment of Chinese geopolitical perceptions.

A preliminary survey of China Academic Journals Database 'CNKI' in the category politics/military/law essentially confirmed China's growing geopolitical interest in understanding implications of India's growing strategic and economic profile. Similar trends

are seen in two prominent Chinese international relations journals in English: *Contemporary International Relations* (published by China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, CICIR) and *China International Studies* (published by China Institute of International Studies, CIIS). The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and its publication arm Social Science Academic Press also have a range of publications about India.

In order to examine China's mental and emotional image about India and its progressive evolution, this book primarily draws from Chinese publications in the English language along with other academic literature on the subject. The Science of Military Strategy (2013), published by the Academy of Military Science of China's People Liberation Army (PLA), provides an institutional perspectives of Chinese military about India's military strategy and its implications for PRC.<sup>56</sup> In addition, in order to understand China's contemporary mental and emotional image of India, this research has a sharper focus on India-China dynamics from 2012 onwards, a period during which there has been a visible intensification of India-China strategic competition. A majority of inferences in this regard have been drawn from five volumes of China's Blue Book series *Annual Report on the Development of International Relations in the Indian Ocean Region* published by Social Science Academic Press under its 'Research Series on the Chinese Dream and China's Development Path.'

### **Annual Reports on the Development of International Relations in the Indian Ocean Region**

The Blue Book series on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a multi-institution collaborative work that includes Research Institute for Indian Ocean Economies (RIIO) of Yunnan University, South Asia Research Centre of CASS and CASS Institute of Asia-Pacific. This annual almanac aims to analyse geopolitical developments in the IOR and its implications for China. The Chinese Academy of Social Science began publishing the annual Blue Book series highlighting China's geopolitical perspectives and strategic approach since 2013 and thus far six volumes have been published under this series.

The public launch of the first blue book on Indian Ocean Region in June 2013 was noticed by strategic commentators outside China even though the report was in Chinese. A report in *The Hindu* states that “China has, for the first time, attempted to spell out its strategy—and plans—to secure its interests in the Indian Ocean” through this blue book.<sup>57</sup> Abhijit Singh argued that despite it not being official policy, the report more than hints at the Chinese government’s supposed Indian Ocean strategy. He further mentions that the report was, in essence, a ‘trial balloon’ aimed at gauging international reactions to proposed Chinese policy measures before coming out with any concrete projections.<sup>58</sup> An article in the *Huffington Post* states that through the articulation of its strategic approach in the blue book, “Beijing has served notice that—while insisting its interests are strictly economic—it is not content to ignore the waters to its west any longer.”<sup>59</sup> While the first volume in this series was in Chinese, subsequent editions were also translated in English and published by Social Sciences Academic Press in collaboration with Springer-Verlag. Given these rather ominous and interesting premises drawn solely from the abstract of the first volume, the content of this Blue Book series, even after its availability in English, remains rather unexplored.

In these annual reports, Chinese scholars have explored geopolitical developments in the IOR during the year gone by and have suggested possible strategic responses for consideration by Beijing. Each of these volumes provides the Chinese geopolitical perspective about the strategic situation in the world, in Asia and in the IOR. Events of geopolitical significance during the year gone by have been used as contextual references to analyse China’s geopolitical challenges and opportunities in the region and suggest suitable policy recommendations.

In addition to the broad focus on the regional geopolitics, each of the volumes also carries a subtheme for more granular focus on the specific issue. The Annual Report (2014) did not carry any subtitle but focussed on the geopolitics of South Asia and the Bay of Bengal. Each of the subsequent reports did carry a prominent subtitle as a key theme, that is, Maritime Silk Road in the Annual

Report (2015); Modi's India in the Annual Report (2016); Belt and Road Initiative and South Asia in the Annual Report (2017); and Indo-Pacific: Concept Definition and Strategic Implementation in the Annual Report (2018).

While the title of the series indicates that this study is about the Indian Ocean, India-China dynamics have remained the core focus area. These reports have tracked the evolving contours of India-China interactions at a global, regional, sub-regional and bilateral level along with a detailed analysis of their implications for China. All four volumes of this series have devoted more than 50 per cent of analytical efforts towards the assessment of India's strategic and economic profile; foreign policy approaches at sub-regional, regional and global level; and India's relations with major powers. In essence, these reports scribe a running narrative of the Chinese perspective on the regional geopolitics and India-China relations, a continuous effort to decipher the geopolitical calculus of India and the future contour of India-China relations.

Among the literature reviewed during this research, these five volumes clearly stand out in articulating the mental and emotional image of India as seen from Beijing along with the detailed explanatory analytical context of such assessment. While India-China relations have always been complex due to the concurrent existence of cooperation and confrontation, these annual reports have argued that India-China dynamics have become truly multidimensional and are being simultaneously conducted in both continental and maritime arenas at bilateral, regional and global levels. The reports also state that while a competitive dimension had always existed in the India-China bilateral dynamics, the strategic competition between the two powers has clearly begun to intensify from 2010 onwards and has accelerated during the tenure of the current BJP government under Prime Minister Modi.

These annual reports have noted that India currently enjoys a favourable strategic environment while strategic constraints for China have increased. India has managed to establish its dominance in South Asia, which has increased difficulty for China in progressing its economic and strategic engagement in the region. The Indo-

Pacific construct, in the Chinese perception, is a strategic design to contain China, while it helps India to expand its strategic footprint in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. Similarly, it has been argued that while US-China relations have progressively become confrontational and the US has enhanced its strategic efforts for comprehensive containment of China, Indo-US relations have been growing from strength to strength. India's growing economy and optimistic assessment of its future growth potential has not only enhanced Delhi's attractiveness at the global and regional level but has also allowed India to pursue its diplomacy with confidence. India's objection to One Belt One Road (OBOR) significantly enhanced Beijing's difficulty in the implementation of OBOR. In the Chinese perception, India's negative approach towards OBOR could potentially enhance scepticism towards OBOR projects in other countries in the Indo-Pacific. These geopolitical factors have allowed India to adopt an increasingly assertive approach towards China. The analyses in the annual reports have not only undertaken a granular examination of these evolving geopolitical trends, but also through a retrospective and prospective analytical framework have undertaken a comprehensive impact assessment for China and suggested mitigating policy options.

Unarguably the Blue Book series published by CASS is not the official position of the People's Republic of China (PRC), but these studies are also not purely academic reflections either. The Blue Book series are studies commissioned by the PRC. In addition, unlike in many other countries the interface among academic institutions, think tanks and the government in China remain close. Although the extent to which these annual reports influence PRC's official views is largely unknowable, the geopolitical assessment contained in these annual reports closely mirrors the official Chinese views about regional strategic environment in the official white papers on 'China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation' and 'the Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative,' which were published in January 2017 and June 2017, respectively. In addition, the arguments contained in the annual reports have been distilled from the prevailing strategic discourses in China as

seen from the extensive references cited in these volumes. While the assessments in this Blue Book series may or may not represent official views, they certainly provide a distilled overview of contemporary strategic debates in China.

However, this Blue Book series is an openly disseminated (*gongkai*) literature aimed at explaining Chinese positions and policies. The central focus of this intellectual endeavour is to advocate China's 'win-win' argument for creating a 'community with a shared future,' which envisions an open, inclusive world with lasting peace, universal security and common prosperity; and to resolutely reject the 'China threat' theory as a geopolitical imagination underpinned by the Cold War mentality.

In so far as India-China relations are concerned, these annual reports contend that India has been accustomed to looking at its relations with China from a geopolitical and national security point of view, and regards China as a competitor rather than a partner. Notwithstanding these pretentious polemics, there is a need to examine these contentions as these geopolitical assumptions and assessments may have a direct bearing on Beijing's future outlook and strategy in the IOR in general and for India-China relations in particular. A close reading of this annual series helps in understanding temporal shifts in Beijing's perceptions and future outlooks, and the triggers that have caused this shift.

## The Chapters

This book is not about understanding the nature of rivalry dynamics between India and China but prominently focusses on China's mental and emotional image of India, which has remained an underexplored dimension in the contemporary scholarship. The characterisation of India-China relations as 'rivalry' in the book is simply a recognition of the fact that elements of rivalry constitute a predominant dimension in the bilateral dynamics. The aim of the book is two-fold.

- First, this book is an attempt to update and strengthen our understanding of the evolving Chinese perception about India. Given the criticism about dependence on Western interpretations

about China in the Indian scholarship, this book is an effort to analyse China's contemporary perceptual image about India primarily through the analysis of Chinese publications on the subject. To trace evolutionary shifts, dependence on interpretive works of Indian and Western scholarship was inescapable.

- Second, this book questions the prevalent notion of characterising India-China rivalry as 'one-sided' or 'asymmetric.' Based on the assessment of China's perceptions about India, this book argues that this contention about rivalry dynamics between India and China—being driven by India's geopolitical imagination about the Chinese threat while China remains unconcerned or dismissive—is no longer valid.

Chapter 2 explores evolving rivalry dynamics between India and China from the time of their independence till the first decade in the new millennium. While there existed no historical animosity in the historical civilisational experience, China considered India (at least partially) blameworthy for China's "humiliation" at the hands of the West due to the participation of Indians in the British colonial venture into China. These early impressions about India by China formed some basic strands of perceptual schema or mental images of a potential rival. This chapter contends that the initiation of rivalry dynamics between India and China was certainly a 'one-sided,' and began with Nationalist China viewing Independent India as a rival in 1947 and continued even after the emergence of the PRC in 1949. It has been observed that while India-China rivalry dynamics began as positional rivalry for regional leadership in Asia, China's innate sense of insecurity of its key periphery in Tibet and boundary dispute added spatial dimensions to the ongoing positional rivalry. Unarguably, China's early perceptions of India have undergone periodic calibration with changes in geopolitical milieu but a broad subtext of strategic mistrust has continued to linger.

Even though the Chinese disdain for India was clearly evident in the aftermath of Beijing's easy victory in the 1962 war, China remained wary of India's strategic potential and her engagement with the US in the aftermath of the 1962 war and later with the

USSR. Only for a brief period during the eighties, China's security concerns regarding India were moderated to some extent with perceived force correlation superiority of China over India. Even then, China continued its balancing approach towards India by supporting Pakistan to establish a strategic equipollence in South Asia as a safeguard for India's hegemonic aspirations.

While India's nuclear test in 1998 significantly redefined the bilateral strategic equation, India's economic rise and Act East policy to some extent altered economic and diplomatic equations. In the broader geopolitical context, while India's rising strategic profile was being applauded, China's geopolitical situation had begun to cause anxiety. In this altered geopolitical context, India-China relations entered a better phase with both sides looking to downplay the prospect of rivalry with emphasis on convergences and complementarity in their efforts to strengthen bilateral relations. However, strategic mistrust has continued to persist. While the Chinese declaratory policy continues to emphasise common interests and the necessity of being partners and good neighbours, India's growing diplomatic profile, strategic cooperation with major powers and growing military capability is being viewed as a serious strategic concern and a long-term threat to China.

Many scholars and analysts are of the opinion that there exists an asymmetry in the mutual perceptions of India and China vis-à-vis each other. While India considers China as a major threat, China does not take India seriously. Chapter 2 will argue that China has always factored in India in its security calculations. In the past seven decades, geopolitical contexts of India-China dynamics have undergone significant changes. However, the intricate interplay of the four basic perceptual sinews: recognition of India's strategic potential as a future threat; an innate sense of China's civilisational superiority over India; India's propensity to align with the West; and perceived hegemonic aspirations of India—have remained key factors in shaping the Chinese policy towards India. After this long sweep at India-China dynamics, the next two chapters focus on China's contemporary perceptions about regional geopolitics and India-China relations.

Chapter 3 argues that bilateral dynamics at dyadic, regional and global levels are not the only variables shaping India-China relations. Delhi and Beijing strategic interactions and the nature of relationships with other actors at regional and global levels have also become important factors. The evolution of the international structures away from Cold War bipolarity has certainly opened up avenues of cooperation between China and India, which is seen in the increasing policy coordination between the two rising powers. At the same time, strategic competition seems to be intensifying as strategic interests of the two rising powers have begun to overlap. This chapter states that while China's strategic interests have seen exponential expansion in recent times, China has been grappling to make sense of the growing strategic complexity and considers India as an 'elephant in the room' while pursuing its engagement in South Asia and the IOR.

Chinese scholars opine that triangular dynamics between China-India-US are a key factor in the evolving power structure in the Asia-Pacific and India's position in this strategic triangle is considered as a critical variable. The concept of Indo-Pacific has generated significant intellectual inquiry among Chinese scholars and their assessments about its implications for China critically dwell upon India-China dynamics. In the Chinese view, the Indo-Pacific concept is a geopolitical design for a comprehensive design to contain China and at the same time enhance the strategic profile of India – whose strength is rising and its geographical advantages are prominent – as a key balancer of China in the region. Geopolitical trends towards the operational implementation of the Indo-Pacific construct have enhanced China's security concerns in its strategic periphery in the South China Sea and are also seen as an obstacle in China's westward expansion in the IOR. Chinese scholars argue that India has not only established its dominance in the region, which it considers as its exclusive sphere of influence, but has also constrained freedom of action of external powers, including China.

South Asia and the IOR have progressively emerged as a locus of China's strategic and economic interest as a key region for the implementation of the OBOR strategy, particularly the 21st Century

Maritime Silk Road. While the strategic importance of the region for China has significantly enhanced, Beijing is facing increasing constraints in its diplomatic and economic outreach in the region. In so far as South Asia is concerned, Chinese scholars argue that New Delhi has managed to establish a predominance in South Asia. Pakistan, China's only friend in the region, has not only lost its ability to maintain strategic balance in Asia but also has become progressively isolated in regional politics. Notwithstanding the active promotion of China's goodwill through 'win-win' arguments for shaping a 'shared destiny,' China has not been able to effectively negate prevalent narratives portraying China's economic policy as 'predatory' and its growing military power as a 'threat' to regional security order, which has contributed towards the persistence of strategic mistrust and uncertainty about China's intentions. In addition, in the Chinese perception, strategic uncertainties in India-China relations, India's growing dominance in the region, and Delhi's obstructionist views towards OBOR have emerged as critical impediments.

Chapter 4 explores China's contemporary mental and emotional image of India and Chinese assessments about India-China dynamics as highlighted in the five volumes of the annual reports. In the Chinese perception, India-China relations are termed as 'the most important and the most complicated bilateral relations' with the simultaneous existence of Four Cs, that is, Conflict, Competition, Coordination and Cooperation at the bilateral, regional and global level. Strategic competition is evident in both countries' national security policies, which are driven by mutual security dilemma and strategic mistrust. Strategic interactions between the two countries have become truly multidimensional and are being simultaneously conducted in both the continental and maritime arena. In addition to the existing structural constraints in India-China relations, namely, border dispute, trade imbalances, and China's relations with Pakistan, India-China relations have become further complicated with the overlap of strategic space of the two countries and resultant strategic dilemma. The Indian Ocean has emerged as a key intersection zone of Indian and Chinese strategic interest.

From the Chinese perspective, strategic competition between two countries has begun to intensify due to India's increasingly assertive approach towards China at the bilateral and regional level with the advent of Prime Minister Modi. China's growing discomfiture with India's assertive diplomacy in general and India's discontent on OBOR in particular, has progressively become more accentuated and Chinese assessment towards future outlook has progressively become pessimistic with an indication that bilateral relations may 'go astray'.

Chinese scholars have observed that India-China relations are, in essence, asymmetric power relations given the wide gap in the national power and international status. At the same time it has also been noted that notwithstanding the existing gap between the national power in favour of China, China's determination and will to invest in diplomatic and military resources in its dealing with India is weaker since the international and regional environment for India is more favourable than that for China. Chinese scholars have argued that India is deeply aware that China's rise requires a peaceful and stable external environment and there exists significant strategic constraint on China for initiating stern countermeasures. This understanding allows India to employ a range of provocative measures within a controllable range against China, which may include continued support to Dalai Lama and Tibetan separatist, small border incidents and an overall aggressive stance towards China. These assessments simply highlight ambivalence and contradiction in China's emotional and mental images about India. While there continue to exist traditional low regard for India's national power and its future potential, The Chinese also perceive India as a serious strategic challenge to China's growing strategic and economic interests.

Chapter 5 argues that the characterisation of India-China rivalry as 'one sided' or 'asymmetric' is no longer valid. Notwithstanding the relative gap in strategic power and overt display of a dismissive attitude towards India, Beijing has always factored India in its security calculus and has remained concerned with India's ability to undermine China's territorial interests and regional ambitions. In

the contemporary period, as India expands its defence capabilities, extends its regional outreach and deepens its engagement with major powers, Beijing has begun to factor New Delhi into its strategic calculus even more seriously.

Chapter 6 examines future scenarios of alternative futures for India-China dynamics. It argues that India-China relations prior Ladakh standoff in a state of ‘restrained ambivalence’ or what rivalry theorist may call as ‘negative peace’. The recent standoff has certainly rest the relation to a new normal and future contours of bilateral dynamics remains uncertain. However, ongoing efforts towards progressive disengagement indicates a possibility of eventual reversal towards ‘restrained ambivalence’. Even in the most optimistic scenario, the nature of bilateral dynamics would continue to exhibit the dual characteristics of economic and political engagement along with geopolitical balancing behaviour. In the case of Sino-Indian relations, even though there exists a range of structural divergences and points of frictions, there seems to be a mutual desire for seeking competitive coexistence.

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## 2. China's Ambivalent Vision of India: Persistent Attitude and Shifting Perceptions

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It has often been argued that while India and China are both old civilisations, they are new nations and also new neighbours separated by the Himalayan mountain ranges. Until its annexation by People Republic of China (PRC) in 1950, Tibet, as an independent entity, has been the actual buffer between India and China. Even though there exist extensive historical narratives of civilisational interactions between the two large neighbours, such interactions were limited due to the geographical barrier of the Himalayan mountain ranges and a constantly shifting periphery that seldom made them contiguous neighbours.

In the post-colonial period, these two civilisations simultaneously emerged as independent nation states in 1947. Both countries aspired to shape their destiny to ascend to the level of their respective apogee of historical eminence of the pre-colonial period. According to John Garver, the power and ambition of these states dwarfed the capabilities of the other states lying along their common flanks.<sup>1</sup> The intractable struggle to reach a mutually acceptable accommodation between these two large and powerful neighbours is still continuing even after more than seven decades.

This chapter focuses primarily on Chinese views and perceptions of India that progressively shaped its approach towards India. China's early impressions about India formed some basic strands of perceptual schema or mental images of a potential rival. This chapter tracks the evolutionary contours of Chinese perceptions about India in the past seven decades.

While there existed no historical animosity in the historical civilisational experience, China's early perceptions of India were shaped by the participation of Indians in British colonial ventures into China. After their independence, their self-image as natural great powers and centres of civilisations induced positional rivalry for regional and global influences. China's innate sense of insecurity of its key periphery in Tibet and boundary dispute added spatial dimensions to the ongoing positional rivalry. Unarguably, Chinese perceptions of India have undergone periodic calibration with changes in geopolitical milieu but a broad subtext of strategic mistrust has continued to linger. Many scholars and analysts argue that there is an asymmetry in the mutual threat perceptions of India and China vis-à-vis each other. While India considers China as a major threat, China does not take India seriously. This chapter will argue that China has always factored in India in its security calculations.

### **Civilisational Memory and Early Impressions**

Historical experiences of interactions are considered to be key elements that shape the perceptions of nation states towards each other. Robert Jervis has argued that history also provides state actors with the tools to 'detect patterns and causal links,' and what can be learned from 'key events in international history is an important factor in determining the images that shape the interpretation of incoming information.'<sup>22</sup> History thus can act as a filter in actors' cognitive analyses of new information.

China's perceptions of India are also rooted in historical experiences. Historically, interactions between India and China were limited. Although Buddhism gradually travelled from India to China, it did not emerge as a dominant link except for connections with Tibetan Buddhism, which developed some trade and patronage network with the Himalayan belt in North India. Notwithstanding limited interactions, India had a rather positive image in China and was referred to as *Tian zhu* (western heaven) since ancient times. However, China's modern encounter with India during the colonial period created a negative perception. India was seen as integral to the

British export of opium, the Opium Wars and the Young husband expedition of 1905.<sup>3</sup> By the late 1940s, there existed four prominent strands in China's perceptions of India.

First, there was a recognition of India's immense power potential, both economic and military. From 1808 onwards the British Expeditionary Force included a significant number of Indian troops in every Anglo-Chinese military encounter. During the Qing period, there was a clear awareness about the strategic challenge from British India on multiple fronts in Tibet and Xinjiang on land borders and also on its southern front from seaward.<sup>4</sup> After the First Opium War, Qing officials noted that a poor island country with limited resources had suddenly become powerful due to its control of economic and military resources that lie in the 'five India'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Sun Yat-sen stated that Britain's ability to project power into China was only because of Britain's control over Indian manpower and finances. In his view, "Without India, the British Empire is nothing but a third-rate country."<sup>6</sup>

Second, China held a very negative view of India since modern China saw India as an agent of British imperialism. In British garrisons in China there was a heavy presence of Indians who not only guarded and protected British assets but also facilitated British business interests. Due to their substantial presence in British security, Indians in China were one of the most visible symbols of China's 'humiliation'.<sup>7</sup> The use of Indian soldiers in the various British military assaults in China and the deployment of Indian police personnel in the British concessions contributed towards a negative attitude towards India and Indians.

Third, China's nationalist narrative also postulated China's civilisational superiority over India and argued that throughout most of its history China was a great nation and, unlike India, a powerful state whose influence extended over wide regions of Asia.<sup>8</sup> In comparison, since the Qing dynasty India was noted as an example of how not to run a nation. The axiom about Indians perceived complicity in their own colonisation was quite well-established in China by 1904-05. Notably, Kang Youwei, the famous late Qing reformer, who had visited India (in 1901-03 and 1909) believed that

“India was a lost cause to be used and abused only as a pawn in international politics.”<sup>9</sup>

In the early 20th century, intense intellectual churning in China began to explore possible pathways for China’s modernisation by investigating reasons for its progressive decline. During this quest, a new historical genre called *wangguo shi* (“lost country histories”) flourished in China that aimed at avoiding the mistakes made by other countries during the colonial period. India was the quintessential example of a ‘*wangguo*’ along with other countries such as Poland that had been “lost” to the imperialists.<sup>10</sup> China’s leaders were determined that China had to modernise in order to stave off imperialism. While China wanted to be rich and strong like the Western powers and Japan, the Chinese were acutely conscious of avoiding India’s fate. KM Panikkar has described this perception of Chinese superiority “Kuomintang attitude” towards India in these words:<sup>11</sup>

It did not take me long to discover that the Kuomintang attitude towards India, while genuinely friendly, was inclined to be a little patronizing. It was the attitude of an elder brother who was considerably older and well established in the world, prepared to give his advice to a younger brother struggling to make his way. Independence of India was welcome, but of course, it was understood that China as the recognized Great Power in the East after the war expected India to know her place. The Foreign Office or the Wai Chaio pu was the best-organized department of the Government and it was here that this doctrine was most firmly held.

Fourth, the public articulations of Indian leaders about India’s ambition to play a larger role in Asia were viewed by China as India’s hegemonic aspiration to imitate the British imperial construct in Asia in the post-colonial period. Soon after its publication in 1946, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s *Discovery of India* was carefully read by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders and they perceived that Nehru had laid bare his ambitions of building “a great Indian empire” in Asia in this book. Chairman Mao Zedong is said to have

described independent India's founding fathers as only a 'transitory liberal bourgeoisie' who wished to impose unjust imperial treaties on China's 'Middle Kingdom' pride.<sup>12</sup>

These four basic strands of Chinese perceptions of India—recognition of India's strategic potential; an innate sense of China's civilisational superiority over India; India's propensity to align with the West; and its hegemonic aspirations—created a stereotype mental and emotional image of India as a potential rival. Further sections will show an intricate interplay of these four basic perceptual sinews in shaping China's attitudinal approach towards India.

### **Ephemeral Bonhomie in the Shadow of Strategic Dilemma**

While at the time of India's independence, China was mired in its own internal struggle between Nationalist and Communist forces, India was started to be seen as a threat to China in Tibet, the Himalayan states and in Southeast Asia.

In July 1949, when Tibet expelled the Nationalist Chinese representatives from Lhasa after complaining about Communist infiltration, it was seen by the Nationalists and the Communists as evidence of suspected Indian and British maleficence.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese were also concerned about India's growing strategic influence over the Himalayan states of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim. These three Himalayan states had essentially recognised India's role as a security provider similar to the arrangement under the British Raj through treaties concluded in 1949-50. India's efforts in the championing independence of Indonesia and Myanmar were further seen heuristically as India's imperial ambitions in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>14</sup>

After the victory of the Communists in China, India was the second country in the non-communist bloc to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>15</sup> While India aimed to foster a close relation, Mao Zedong was committed to restoring the Middle Kingdom to its historical greatness as an atonement for the preceding "century of humiliation." Mao's concept of China was not so much civilisational as political and therefore territorial. At the time of the establishment of the PRC in

October 1949, Mao had proclaimed that he would take concrete steps to convert its erstwhile frontiers into the limits of its sovereign space and the recovery of these territories would be the primary goal of his foreign policy.<sup>16</sup> India's ambivalence towards the ambiguous status of Tibet and its emphasis on the British-defined McMahon Line as a boundary between India and China was heuristically perceived by China as expansionist (or territorially irredentist).

Highlighting China's position of leadership, a Chinese newspaper argued in 1952 that "the Chinese people have elevated their nation to its rightful place as one of the leaders of the world ... we have set a new standard for the peoples of Asia and the Pacific."<sup>17</sup> Yet, in the late 1940s and the 1950s, Communist China was still struggling for international recognition, whereas India was considered as a regional power of significance and Nehru was regarded among the tallest statesman in Asia. India's growing status as a regional power was viewed by Mao and the Communist leadership as anathema to Chinese ascendance.<sup>18</sup>

Neville Maxwell has highlighted two prominent strains in China's attitude towards India during the fifties: "firstly, the Marxist-Leninist perception, placing India in historical and dialectical context; secondly, the relationship with the Indian Government as a neighbour and fellow Asian power."<sup>19</sup> From the doctrinal perspectives, India was assessed to be on an anti-revolutionary path due to close relations between the Chinese nationalists and leaders of Indian National Congress; a sense of mutual admiration between Nehru and Chiang Kai; suppression of a communist-led uprising in India; and also the growing international profile of Nehru. India's foreign policy approach and her engagement with the US was perceived as anti-revolutionary. In addition, China remained deeply suspicious of India's regional and global ambitions, particularly regarding her intentions towards Tibet. In the Chinese view, independent India under Nehru was continuing Britain's policies of keeping Tibet as a buffer state between India and China. The Chinese communists imagined that there was a sinister Anglo-American-Indian plot to control Tibet.<sup>20</sup> In Chinese Communist publications, India was portrayed as a bourgeois society with imperial aspirations.<sup>21</sup>

Notwithstanding the perception of an anti-revolutionary image of India, acquiring friends was the diplomatic mantra of the PRC, and India was singled out for special attention by Beijing.<sup>22</sup> India's goodwill was considered essential by Communist China for its legitimacy over Tibet and also for furthering her relations with regional countries who were largely wary of the spread of communism in the region. Mao's call for a united front between the socialist countries India and other 'peace-loving' countries indicated a slight shift in China's attitude to India and other newly independent states in Asia.<sup>23</sup> It is pertinent to mention that this apparent shift was shaped by India's acceptance of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet after the Communist invasion in Oct 1950, her neutrality in the Korean War and also championing the PRC's acceptance at the United Nations (UN). Even though Mao was not enthusiastic about the philosophy of non-alignment, he endorsed Nehru's initiative as a means for forging broader Asian solidarity.<sup>24</sup>

In 1954, India and China concluded *Panchsheel* or the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, which included mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence. Mid-1950s heralded a brief period of bonhomie between India and China with its eponymous description of brotherhood as 'Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai'.

India played a crucial role in facilitating the inclusion of China in the Afro Asian Conference at Bandung in 1955. The conference itself was a stage for a remarkable display of India-China cooperation. India significantly helped in enhancing China's stature and regional engagement. However, according to BK Nehru the seeds of misunderstanding between India and China were sown in Bandung when the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai misperceived Prime Minister Nehru's efforts to introduce him at the world stage as a bit condescending and resented India's display of 'big brotherliness'.<sup>25</sup> China, due to a perceived sense of superiority, took umbrage to what they considered as patronising behaviour of India. It seems that Communist China continued with the Kuomintang attitude of Nationalist China in their perception of India.

Considering the strategic importance of Tibet, China had signalled to treat the border issue with magnanimity in return for India's assurance of non-interference in Tibet.<sup>26</sup> In a letter to Zhou in December 1958, Nehru pointed out that although both countries considered the McMahon Line as a legacy of British imperialism, the two sides had discussed the border as late as 1956 and had agreed to respect the McMahon Line in the eastern sector for the time being. In a harsh reply on January 23, 1959, Zhou rejected Nehru's portrayal of the border situation and denied that there was any implicit border agreement at all.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, Beijing strongly suspected that India harboured ambitions to split Tibet from China due to India's approach towards maintaining special relations with Tibet based on historic ties. The Chinese leadership also suspected that India was colluding with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to support Tibetan rebels against the PRC, notwithstanding constant assurance from India and her efforts to facilitate a dialogue between the Dalai Lama and the PRC. After the uprising of 1959 in Tibet against China, India's decision to grant asylum to the Dalai Lama catalysed the deterioration in bilateral relations. Even though the Dalai Lama issued a statement that he had left Tibet left on his own will, China suspected India of orchestrating the Dalai Lama's flight into exile.<sup>28</sup>

In the Chinese perception, the confluence of the boundary dispute and the rebellion in Tibet were seen as a sinister design by India to control Tibet. Chairman Mao Zedong urged the *People's Daily* to criticise Prime Minister Nehru and the "Indian expansionists" who "want ardently to grab Tibet". Mao's perceptions were refracted through the prism of ideology. Thus the article claimed that "the Indian big bourgeoisie maintains innumerable links with imperialism ... Moreover, by its class nature, the big bourgeoisie has a certain urge for outward expansion ... it more or less reflects, consciously or unconsciously, certain influences of [an] imperialist policy of intervention."<sup>29</sup> During most of the 1950s, the leaders in Beijing and New Delhi had been willing to keep the border disputes on the back burner. The ensuing march by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) toward the Tibetan-Indian border after the Tibetan

rebellion made it impossible to keep the border issue from becoming a matter of prime concern. As the situation in Tibet worsened, it was obvious that Tibet was destined to become the central issue between India and China, even though India had very little to do with the revolt in Tibet.

It is pertinent to mention that China accepted the McMahon Line as her boundary with Burma while disputing the same line as a basis of boundary demarcation with India.<sup>30</sup> From the Chinese perspective, the central problem was the Indian failure to reconcile itself with the Chinese occupation of Tibet. In October 1960, Premier Zhou Enlai in an interview to Edgar Snow hinted at the confluence of the Tibet rebellion and the India-China boundary issue in the Chinese perception towards India.

India doesn't want to settle the boundary questions. The real idea they have in mind is to turn China's Tibet region into a buffer zone... They don't want Tibet to become a Socialist Tibet. That is why after the rebellion ... they became more dissatisfied and shortly afterwards the Sino-Indian border question came to the fore.<sup>31</sup>

By the late fifties, the transient bonhomie between India and China has transformed into a full-blown strategic rivalry. Manjeet Pardesi highlights the critical role of perceptions in the initiation of strategic rivalry. He states that strategic rivalry begins “when at least one state in a dyad consciously attributes one of the following four ‘enemy’ images to the other state: expansionist (or territorially irredentist), hegemonic (circumscribing a given state’s foreign policy), imperial (interfering in a given state’s domestic politics in addition to being hegemonic), or strategic-competitor (posing latent/long-term threat).”<sup>32</sup> The preceding description of Chinese perceptions towards India aptly fits into this theoretical framework of a strategic rival. The India-China rivalry began as a positional rivalry in 1947 for status at the apex of the Asian power hierarchy. A spatial/territorial dimension was added to this positional rivalry after the PRC militarily annexed Tibet. By the late 1950s, both positional and

spatial issues were in contention and the India-China rivalry had become complex.<sup>33</sup> In the Chinese perception, India had emerged as a strategic competitor that posed a serious threat to China due to her expansionist and hegemonic ambitions.

### **Misperceptions, War and its Aftermath**

A week-long talk in April 1960 in Delhi between Nehru and Zhou failed to resolve differences. India was reluctant to accede to Chinese control over Aksai Chin area in Ladakh. China, due to her sensitivity over the security of Tibet was unwilling to accept the McMahon Line without acceptance of the status quo in Ladakh. Two more rounds of discussions were held in 1960, one in Beijing and one more in erstwhile Rangoon by the representatives of both governments without any success.

As PLA deployments on the Tibet-India boundary began to unilaterally redefine disputed territory along the India-Tibet boundary as per Chinese perceptions, in November 1961 Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru ordered an increase in the number of posts in the territory disputed with China, a move that became known as the “forward policy”. Indian patrols advanced into disputed areas of the Himalayan frontier to establish outposts similar to, and often behind, those advanced by the PLA previously. Differing perception of the un-demarcated border led to aggressive border patrolling by both sides, which led to clashes between the border guarding forces of both sides with increasing frequency and lethality.<sup>34</sup>

Growing public acrimony and dangerous brinkmanship spiralled in to open conflict when Chinese troops launched a surprise offensive on 20 October 1962. During the 32 days of the conflict, China managed to secure control over disputed territory that linked Tibet to Xinjiang in the Aksai Chin area in the Western Sector, and advanced 160 km in the Eastern Sector. After declaring a unilateral ceasefire on 21 November, China withdrew its forces in the Eastern Sector 20 km behind the pre-war line of control. The conflict was, without doubt, an embarrassing military defeat for India, which still remains a bitter memory in the Indian psyche.

There exists a rich literature on the India-China War and many

analysts have attributed India's defeat to the remarkable lack of strategic judgement on the part of Indian political and military leaders who had assured themselves that the ongoing brinkmanship would remain limited to occasional skirmishes.<sup>35</sup> While a majority of the existing literature has focussed on India's commission and omission as a key factor in the conflict, there has been limited inquiry about the reasons for the 1962 war from the Chinese perspective and the considerations that led PRC's leaders to opt for large-scale use of armed force.<sup>36</sup>

Citing Chinese publications on the 1962 war, Garver is of the opinion that from the Chinese perspective the root cause of the 1962 war and the chronic tension between India and China was India's desire for imperial dominion. There exists unanimous agreement among Chinese scholars that the primary cause of the 1962 war was an Indian attempt to undermine Chinese rule and to turn Tibet into a "buffer zone" (*huan chong guo*).<sup>37</sup> In the Chinese assessment, India aimed to establish a "greater Indian empire" (*dayindu diguo*) within the realm of the old British Empire and stretching from Southeast Asia to the Middle East. Afghanistan, Burma and Tibet were to be "buffers" (*huan chong guo*) within this imperial framework. Another study traced the source of the problem to Nehru's "regional expansionist policies" (*dichu kuozhangzhuyi zhengse*), plus his "nationalist" ideology.<sup>38</sup> Chinese leaders did not see India's approach on the border issue in isolation but conflated this with broader domestic and external factors of internal hardship due to the Great Leap Forward campaign, rebellion in Tibet and Xinjiang, ongoing Taiwan imbroglio and their ideational fracture with the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup> They surmised that India is attempting to take advantage of China during her difficult period.

In his analysis of the Chinese decision leading to war in 1962, Garver has argued that there existed two major, interrelated sets of reasons in the Chinese decision for war. First, a need to punish and end perceived Indian efforts to undermine Chinese control of Tibet. The second reason was to punish and end supposed Indian aggression against Chinese territory along the border. He further argues that

India's policies along the border, and especially the Forward Policy, adopted in November 1961, were seen by China's leaders as constituting incremental Indian seizure of Chinese-controlled territory, and there is little basis for deeming that view inaccurate. Chinese perceptions of Indian policies toward Tibet were fundamentally erroneous, however, and those Chinese misperceptions contributed substantially to the 1962 war.<sup>40</sup>

Chinese preconception of a negative image of India highlighted in the earlier section was a key factor in Mao's authoritative but erroneous judgement about Indian motives. As per Whiting, preconceptions can act as a filter for selecting relevant evidence of intention as well as a determinant of bias in assessing the degree of threat to be anticipated.<sup>41</sup> Chinese perceptual filters that linked Tibet and the 1962 war: fundamental attribution error and projection. The fundamental attribution error (also known as correspondence bias or over attribution effect) refers to an individual's tendency to attribute another's actions to their character or personality, while attributing their own behaviour to external situational factors outside of their control. Projection involves attributing blame to others for consequences of own action.<sup>42</sup> Garver argues that even though the difficulty in Tibet was China's own creation, Mao committed a fundamental attribution error in concluding that Nehru was seeking to seize Tibet, and made India the main object of Chinese projection of difficulty that the Chinese rule encountered in Tibet.<sup>43</sup>

Even though contemporary research based on archival references has refuted the Chinese perception about India's so-called 'nefarious design' over Tibet and Indian support to the anti-China struggle in Tibet,<sup>44</sup> contemporary scholarship in China continues to justify and explain the decisions of the Chinese Communist Party for the conflict. In addition, it also continues to retain adversarial perceptions and mistrust towards India.<sup>45</sup>

Easy victory over India in 1962 fuelled a superiority complex and overconfidence on the part of the Chinese. With the demonstration of nuclear weapon capability, China's strategic capability had considerably improved vis-à-vis India. While militarily India was

no longer a challenge, China continued to remain wary of India's potential and her engagement with the US in the aftermath of the 1962 war and later with the USSR. In order to balance India, China made concerted efforts to weaken India's strategic position in South Asia and found a useful proxy in Pakistan to constrain India. In addition, Mao also supported insurgency within India.<sup>46</sup> China supported Pakistan in its 1965 war with India because she saw India as a "neo-colonialist regime being built up by US imperialism and the Soviet expansionists as a way of encircling China."<sup>47</sup>

China's perception of a strategic challenge from India-Soviet collaboration was a key motivator for Beijing's support to Islamabad in 1971. The Chinese became apprehensive that Soviet-supported Indian intervention in East Pakistan could set a precedent for a possible intervention by India in Tibet. While India could create difficulties in Tibet, the Soviet Union would pose a problem in Xinjiang.<sup>48</sup> In December 1971, Huang Hua, China's Permanent Representative with United Nations, in his conversation with Henry Kissinger, then National Security Advisor of the United States, emphasised the threat of an India allied with the Soviet Union: "The Soviet Union and India now are progressing along an extremely dangerous track in the subcontinent. And as we have already pointed out this is a step to encircle China."<sup>49</sup> Zhou himself acknowledged China's worst possible strategic predicament in his discussion with the American President Nixon in February 1972: "the worst possibility is ... the eventuality that ... the Soviet Union comes from the north, Japanese and the US from the east, and India into China's Tibet."<sup>50</sup> In the Chinese perception, while India did not pose a credible military threat on her own but she could pose a serious problem in concert with powers inimical to China. This perception has also proven to be enduring even in the contemporary period.

Along with distrust, disdain towards India was also rather prominent in the Chinese perception, which can be seen in the now-declassified transcript of Nixon, Zhou and Mao deliberation in 1972-73. Mao told Kissinger in November 1973, "India did not win independence. If it does not attach itself with Britain, it attaches itself to the Soviet Union."<sup>51</sup> Zhou also did not view India as a fully

sovereign state but a satellite state with imperial ambition.<sup>52</sup> Nixon later summed the Chinese perception towards their neighbour: “The Russian they hate, the Japanese they fear and as for the Indians, they feel contempt.”<sup>53</sup> A poem written by Mao Zedong in 1974 described India rather derisively as a “cow” on whose back rides the Russian “bear”.<sup>54</sup>

## **Rapprochement and Nuclear Tests**

China initiated the first effort to improve relations with India in May 1970 when Mao suggested to the Indian chargé d'affaires that India-China relations should be repaired. Mao's sudden desire to improve relationships with India had emerged not from any perceptual change towards India but had roots in the predicament which China had found itself with the Soviet Union due to a bitter border war in 1969 and Chinese isolation in global geopolitics.<sup>55</sup> The onset of the crisis in East Pakistan and resultant India—Pakistan War prevented follow up on this overture.

After India's assimilation of Sikkim within the Indian federation through a democratic referendum in 1975, China not only intensified diatribe about India's hegemonic aspirations but criticised the Soviet Union more for its support of the Indian action. A special statement issued by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued on 11 September 1974 denounced India and pledged that the Chinese government would not recognise India's illegal annexation of Sikkim.<sup>56</sup>

However ambassadorial relations were re-established in 1976 after a gap of 15 years.<sup>57</sup> China's endeavour to warm up its relationship with India began during the Deng Xiaoping era in 1977-79. This was part of Deng's omnidirectional foreign policy of improving relations with the two superpowers and all countries on the Chinese periphery in order to ensure a peaceful and stable environment for his ambitious economic reforms and modernisation. Garver argues that China's 1977-79 opening to India was part of a broader effort to shore up what was once called “the Northern tier.”<sup>58</sup>

The effort towards rapprochement had a rather shaky start since China decided to invade Vietnam during Foreign Minister

Vajpayee's maiden visit to China in February 1979. Vajpayee had to cut short his visit in protest. However, during this truncated visit both sides agreed to discuss the border issue and China assured to cease support to insurgents in India's North East. China also agreed to open the Kailash Mansarovar route for Indian pilgrims.<sup>59</sup>

The Chinese Foreign Minister Huang visited India in 1981, which established modalities for the resumption of discussions on border issues. Between 1981 and 1987 China and India held eight rounds of negotiations but failed to produce a solution. In 1986, India's grant of statehood to erstwhile North Eastern Frontier Agency as Arunachal Pradesh was objected to by China. Also in this year, the Sumdorong Chu Valley dispute in the eastern sector heated up border tensions once again. While quiet diplomacy managed to keep the crisis from spiralling into conflict, China accused India of massing troops along the border, violating Chinese air space, repeatedly crossing the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and "nibbling at Chinese territory."<sup>60</sup>

In its most significant gesture to promote rapprochement, in the 1980s Beijing moved away from its earlier pro-Pakistan position on the issue of Kashmir and adopted a formally neutral stance on India-Pakistan conflicts. China also refrained from criticising India's intervention in Sri Lanka. India, on the other hand, dropped its insistence that the border agreement had to precede the restoration of bilateral relations. During the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit in 1988, Deng Xiaoping told both sides to forget the unpleasantness of the past and move ahead with an eye to the future.<sup>61</sup>

The Chinese approach towards rapprochement with India was shaped to some extent by moderations of their security perceptions. China's military edge over India had enhanced. India's statement about Tibet being integral to China and assurance on limiting Tibetan political activities in India ameliorated Chinese concerns to some extent.<sup>62</sup> In addition, in the post-Cold War period Russia was not expected to back India strategically in a manner which the Soviet Union had done.

According to Bonnie Glaser, the development of India's navy and the potential for India to interdict shipping in the Strait of Malacca

or deny other powers freedom of access through the Indian Ocean was becoming a growing concern for China in the early nineties. Chinese experts perceived that India could threaten the Chinese Sea Lane of Communication with long-range power projection capability of her two-carrier navy. Therefore, “China requires a larger naval capability to deter such a threat because Beijing could not respond by attacking India in the Himalayas.”<sup>63</sup> This nascent perception of Chinese maritime insecurity added a new dimension to the existing security dilemma in India-China dynamics.

Post Rajiv Gandhi’s visit, multiple channels of regular high-level exchanges between India and China got institutionalised. Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control was signed in 1993, which was followed by the Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field along the LAC in 1996.<sup>64</sup> These agreements aimed at preventing inadvertent escalation of border tensions. In addition, both countries continued to explore and enhance bilateral relations. This phase of diplomatic bonhomie continued till India’s nuclear tests in May 1998.

Beijing’s initial response to the first test on 11 May 1998, reported in the Xinhua News Agency, was restrained and simply expressed concern. However, with polemical reference of China as an ‘enemy number one’ by Defence Minister George Fernandes and Prime Minister Vajpayee citing the Chinese threat in defence of India’s nuclearization, China reacted angrily and strongly to the second series of nuclear explosions of 13 May and launched rhetoric vitriol against India’s nuclear tests. In the following weeks, Chinese officials emphatically reiterated outrage against what they regarded as India’s groundless accusations against China. China’s ambassador to India, Zhou Gang, told the Indian media that India through her “slandering that China posed a threat to India’s security has sabotaged the atmosphere of India-China relations, harmed the developing bilateral relations between China and India, and endangered the future of the relations between the two countries.”<sup>65</sup>

A series of articles in *People’s Daily* castigated India’s nuclear test as “a desire to threaten neighbouring countries and dominate South Asia” and termed India’s approach to link the nuclear test to the

“China threat” as an unbelievable and preposterous logic. China’s ominous tone was evident in the English-language *China Daily* article on 20 May 1998 that condemned India’s move to attribute the nuclear test to the China threat as improper, irresponsible and immoral. Highlighting the betrayal of the Chinese goodwill by India, the article emphasised that “China had been taking a reserved attitude towards provocative statements from India in order to push forward Sino-Indian ties. However, India took China’s forbearance as weakness.”<sup>66</sup>

It is pertinent to highlight that China had been aware of the progress of India’s nuclear and missile programme. In order to balance India, since the 1970s China has been actively supporting Pakistan’s nuclear ambitions, disregarding nuclear proliferation obligations.<sup>67</sup> A Chinese scholar has argued that “had India adopted a little cautious approach, the new negative factor in India-China relations could have been avoided. In essence, the Chinese reaction was directed more against being labelled as the primary motivation for India developing a nuclear capacity rather than against the tests themselves.”<sup>68</sup> As a punitive measure, China joined with the US and other major powers in a rapid, concerted response to hold India accountable for violating the international nuclear arms control and non-proliferation regime. This approach was designed to enhance China’s own international reputation and improve its relationship with the US, which was evident through the rather even treatment of both India and Pakistan in the international forum.<sup>69</sup>

India’s nuclear test and the resultant polemical outburst caused only a brief hiatus in the bilateral relationship. The diplomatic engagement soon resumed a few months later. The meeting of Joint Working Group on the Boundary Question scheduled for October 1998 was postponed until April 1999, but a June 1998 bilateral meeting of military experts went ahead.<sup>70</sup> The Indian government also indicated that it desired to mend fences, which was welcomed by China indicating that it “always attached importance to good neighbourly, friendly and cooperative ties with India,” and that “normalisation of Sino-Indian relations complies with the fundamental interest of the people of both countries.”<sup>71</sup>

Even though Beijing resumed diplomatic engagement post-nuclear test, there was great pressure from the Chinese military for a tougher position towards India. Concern about India's military ambitions and her hegemonic intentions figured prominently in the *People's Liberation Army Daily* immediately after the nuclear tests. Highlighting India's growing military capability, one article observed that "through fifty years of efforts, India now boasts a mighty armed force." Regarding India's strategic intentions, authors argued that "the military-strategic targets of India are to seek hegemony in South Asia, contain China, control the Indian Ocean, and strive to become a military power in the contemporary world." India, the authors concluded, "is waiting for the opportune moment for further expansion to continue to maintain its control over weak and small countries in South Asia, advance further southward, and defend its hegemonistic status in the region."<sup>72</sup> Based on his interviews with Chinese security experts in the fall of 1999, Mike Zhang states that there was a consensus within the Chinese military that the Indian threat is real, and that China should build up its nuclear forces to respond.<sup>73</sup>

Notwithstanding the steady progress made in the India-China relations during the 1990s, China's reactions to India's nuclear test in 1998 proved that a decade's period was too little to dispel the deep-rooted mistrust and misunderstanding between India and China.<sup>74</sup> It needs to be noted that imperatives for engagement with India in the post-Mao period were not due to any fundamental change in the Chinese perception towards India. It needs to be viewed as a tactical approach within the broader rubric of its omnidirectional foreign policy for strategic stability on the periphery for envisaged economic growth in the post-Cold War period. Regarding the Chinese motivations towards rapprochement with India and its implication for future of India-China relations, John Garver highlights that:

What Indian leaders perceive as well-justified concern for India's security, Chinese leaders perceive as Indian hegemony. Since the mid-1970s (when Chinese concern for Soviet hegemonism became acute) Chinese sources have usually not spoken openly

about Indian “hegemony”—although there is a tendency toward frankness in internal documents or in public polemics when Beijing wishes to express displeasure, as, for example, following India’s annexation of Sikkim in 1975 and its nuclear tests in May 1998. Nor is Chinese policy necessarily predicated on opposing what China perceives as Indian hegemony. Other goals often rank higher for Beijing in its ordering of priorities (e.g., thwarting Soviet or U.S. domination), and these higher-ranking objectives frequently lead China to downplay its opposition to Indian hegemony and its support for India’s neighbours against Indian pressure. But, while political and diplomatic exigencies may moderate Beijing’s response to India’s efforts to restrict relations between China and India’s South Asian neighbours, the underlying perception remains essentially unaltered: to China India is a regional hegemon that presumes to block the natural and rightful expansion of China’s relations with its neighbours.<sup>75</sup>

### **China’s Perceptions of India in the New Millennium— Continuities and Change**

At the dawn of the new millennium, the geopolitical context of India-China interactions had changed considerably. Efforts of economic liberalisation of the 1990s in India had begun to show results; India’s large market and rapidly growing economy had enhanced its economic appeal. India began to renew efforts to reclaim its extensive economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asian nations through its ‘Look East’ policy. Southeast Asia countries also reciprocated India’s outreach for regional engagement in order to ameliorate the growing strategic uncertainty of a rising China. With growing economic profile and strategic clout, China’s assertive behaviour had given credence to the ‘China threat’ theory in sharp contrast to China’s self-professed ‘Peaceful rise’ approach. US-China relations had begun to fray with the growing realisation of impending geopolitical competition with China. India, at the same time, was being seen as a useful partner in balancing China by the US and other countries in the region. China’s attempt to isolate India after the 1998 nuclear tests had proven to be futile with a significant

upswing in Indo-US relations. These geopolitical changes acted as a backdrop for India-China relations at the advent of the 21st century. India-China relations seemed to enter one of their better phases. In the declaratory policy, both countries sought to downplay the prospect of rivalry with emphasis on convergences and complementarity in their efforts to strengthen bilateral relations.

In a study of the Chinese strategic perception in 2000, Michael Pillsbury argued that Chinese analysts view India as “a smaller scale version of Japan” with a militaristic strategic culture and hegemonic aspirations that “attempts to foment conflict between China and other nations, and has some areas of military superiority over China, such as its current navy. However, India’s economic reforms are judged insufficient to catch up with China and enter the multipolar world as the sixth pole.”<sup>76</sup> Other scholars have similarly posited the India-China rivalry as one-sided/asymmetric rivalry while the ‘Indians find China and its actions threatening,’ and the Chinese ‘tend not to perceive a serious threat from India.’<sup>77</sup>

According to Shaun Randol, while there existed a largely neutral (but sometimes confounding) perception in China indicating that India is not a priority (at best) and in some cases insignificant (at worst) for China, there are signs that the pendulum is beginning to swing the other way.<sup>78</sup> In a similar vein, Yuan observes, “Beijing is now paying increasing attention to India’s drive for great-power status through diplomatic initiatives and a military build-up.”<sup>79</sup> Driven by shifts in the Chinese perception of India, China’s relations with India are undergoing a period of transition and gradual policy adjustments along with a new ‘idea of India’ is emerging.<sup>80</sup> Although in the past China had been dismissive of India and unwilling to accord it ‘great power status,’ academic publications started attaching the embellishment of ‘great power’ to India and was mentioned in official articulation during the visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to India in 2006.<sup>81</sup>

### **India’s Economic Transformation**

Even though the stereotype image of a ‘backward’ India—compared to a successful, organised and developed China—had

not vanished completely, Chinese analysts have taken a serious note of India's rapid economic growth in recent years. Manjeet Pardesi attributes this change in perception of India's economic growth to a Goldman Sachs report on BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) since this report forms a key reference in most Chinese analyses about India's economic strength and its consequent strategic implications.<sup>82</sup> While India's democratic form of governance is continued to be perceived as 'messy and noisy' and a supposed source of economic stagnation and social instability, some Chinese commentators attribute India's societal resilience to Indian democracy.<sup>83</sup> There has also been growing recognition of India's deep cultural roots, its vast pool of trained manpower and stable governance system as a contributory factor in India's rise. In fact, Chinese analysts have even begun to debate if there exists an 'Indian model' of economic growth.<sup>84</sup> However, opinions are polarised on ideological lines. In general, Chinese liberals tend to praise the Indian model of development, while nationalists and conservatives belittle it.<sup>85</sup> While India significantly lags behind China on key economic and industrial performance criteria, the success of India's domestic software industry led to a reassessment of its economic performance and potential.<sup>86</sup>

The dominant perception in Chinese analyses is that India is unlikely to catch up with China in economic terms, notwithstanding the rather rosy prediction that India could overtake Japan to become the third-largest economy in 2032, behind just the US and China.<sup>87</sup> In the Chinese strategic assessment, an economically buoyant India had both positive and negative consequences for China. In economic terms, India's huge market and the growing economy offered significant opportunity for trade and investment. At the same time, there exists a realisation about growing economic competitiveness since both countries are increasingly competing with each other for resources and investments in the international market. While China does not see India as a serious challenger in economic terms, Chinese analysts remain concerned about the impact of India's growing economy on India's military power and strategic ambitions.<sup>88</sup>

## Growing Focus on India's Military Power

China uses the yardstick of Comprehensive National Power (CNP) (*zonghe guoli*) for comparative assessment of other countries' militaries potential vis-à-vis itself, which is the sum total of the power or strengths of a country's economy, military, science and technology, education, natural resources and overall influence. As per the CNP matrix, China has been consistently ahead of India.<sup>89</sup> Given the perceptions of asymmetry in military power, India was not factored heavily in Chinese military planning since India was not seen as a direct threat. Although Chinese analysts continue to employ a degree of dismissive rhetoric regarding India's pursuit of great power and nuclear status, they are nevertheless undergoing a pronounced perceptual evolution. There is growing consensus within China that India is attempting to become a major military power.<sup>90</sup>

Through a quantitative and qualitative analysis of Chinese strategic publications from 1990-2009, Lora Saalman noted a marked rise in articles about India's military modernisation. She has argued that China is paying growing attention to India's military modernisation though at a lower level than that directed towards the US, Japan and Russia. There has been a pronounced expansion between 2000 and 2001 and again between 2005 and 2006 of China's analyses of India's military modernisation, which closely correlates with the lifting of US-EU sanctions against India in 2000 and the signing of an Indo-US strategic partnership in 2005. Her study has highlighted that:

Chinese analysts are writing more in-depth analyses of India's military modernization; de-hyphenating Pakistan and India in their studies; analysing specific details and strategic implications of Indian military systems; comparing Chinese and Indian military modernization; discussing the strategic implications for China of India's military modernization; and mentioning India in articles focusing on China's defence past and future.<sup>91</sup>

Chinese analysts have been paying close attention to India's high-technology cooperation, conventional weapons imports, space and

nuclear exchange and military exercises and training with Western countries. A number of other articles discuss strategic relations among India, Japan and the US and their impact on China's nuclear deterrent force.

Of the three armed forces, Chinese analysts have singled out the Indian Navy and India's maritime strategic capability for special attention. The Chinese military industry and strategic journals frequently examine articles on India's naval pursuits at great length than those allocated to India's other armed forces. Within China, India's current and future activities in the Indian Ocean, Andaman Islands, South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean all receive varying levels of attention. Aspects of India's maritime cooperation—for import of naval systems, joint research and development, multilateral exercises and international training—also attract China's gaze. In China's assessment, India's maritime ambitions are misattributed to 'pursuit of regional hegemony', 'great power dream', and 'exclusionary control of Indian Ocean.' Misattribution notwithstanding, the Chinese are clearly grappling with the larger implications of the Indo-Pacific region as both India and China turn seaward.<sup>92</sup> Still, others discern India's naval development as a subset of a more offensive stratagem aimed towards China. As Hu Qingliang notes, 'As Indian maritime power develops, India will have the capacity to carry out the competition with China in the sea areas of the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea.'<sup>93</sup>

In the broader rhetorical term, some of the Chinese articulations tend to disparagingly point out the high import content in India's defence modernisation efforts in comparison to China, while at the same time there exists recognition of India's indigenous industrial and scientific capability. As per Lora Saalman, although the majority of Chinese analysts do not perceive a direct military threat from India in the short to medium-term, it could be argued that there exists a nascent 'threat perception' regarding India's military modernisation and cooperation with countries like the US. There are also concerns that the growing Indo-US military partnership may lead India into playing a military role to share some of the latter's defence burdens.<sup>94</sup>

## Strategic Implications of India's Rise

In his extensive review of Chinese language literature about the strategic implications of India's rise, Fravel has argued that Chinese analysts view India's rise and the impact of this development through the lens of its core interests and strategic objectives. India is broadly acknowledged as a rising power with growing regional and global ambitions.<sup>95</sup> Although the Chinese elite certainly recognised competitive dimensions in the bilateral relationship, India is not seen as a significant threat to China's strategic objectives. India's rise is often portrayed as beneficial for China since it contributes towards the "democratisation of international relations" and helps "multi polarisation" of the global order as both China and India "are in favour of a multipolar world and against unipolar hegemony."<sup>96</sup> Highlighting the positive aspects of India's rise, a former Chinese ambassador, Zhou Gang, has argued that "the stronger China and India become, the bigger say they will have in multilateral institutions such as the UN and WTO and the better they could safeguard the rights and interest of the developing countries."<sup>97</sup> India's rise is also seen as beneficial for facilitating China's own economic growth in general and Asian economic integration in particular.

Despite these optimistic assertions, Chinese analysts also view India's rise as a concern. India's rise has, in a sense, exacerbated existing security concerns arising from existing contentious bilateral issues of the border dispute and Tibet. A new security dilemma has emerged due to China's perceived insecurity of her extended Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) in the Indian Ocean and the Chinese assessment of India's hegemonic aspiration 'to control the Indian Ocean region' and 'dominate South Asia as a first-rate international big power.'<sup>98</sup> In addition, China also sees India's expanding and deepening ties in Southeast Asia and Asia through her Look East policy as India's strategic design aimed at constraining and containing China.<sup>99</sup>

## Perspectives on India's Military Strategy from The Science of Military Strategy (2013)

The third edition of the Science of Military Strategy (2013) provides some critical insights into Chinese institutional perspective on India's

Military Strategy.<sup>100</sup> A capstone document of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) prepared by the faculty of China's Academy of Military Sciences (AMS), the Science of Military Strategy elaborates upon the major strategic issues relating to the build-up and application of force by the PLA. Taylor Fravel argues that while the Science of Military Strategy do not reflect China's official military strategy, military strategic guidelines, or military doctrine, they do highlight the views of many of the PLA's leading strategists, some of whom are involved in the formulation of strategy or operational doctrine. He further highlights that the 2013 edition of the Science of Military Strategy reveals how some of the PLA's top strategists assess China's security environment, how military force should be used to secure China's interests, and what kinds of military capabilities the PLA should develop in the future.<sup>101</sup>

While the major focus of this edition of the Science of Military Strategy is to contextualise progressive evolutions China's 'Active Defence Strategic Concept' in the new domains of warfighting in future, the book also contains a rather comprehensive analyses of military strategies of the major Powers in the contemporary world which includes the US, Russia, Japan and India. Though the United States is characterised as China's main adversary, it also argues that the understanding trends in India's military strategy was considered to have "an important significance for understanding and grasping the world and regional strategic setup". Portraying India as "a regional power in South Asia and the Indian Ocean", the Science of Military Strategy (2013) notes that "India is also an emerging major country that is in the midst of arising, and so its international status is improving every day".

The Science of Military Strategy (2013) highlights three key trends in India's evolving military strategy from 1947 till the end of the Cold War.<sup>102</sup>

- India's 'limited offensive strategy' from 1947 till 1960 viewed Pakistan as its most direct threat during this time. At the same, India also intensified its goals of territorial expansion over contested areas along the India-China border. It argued that by 1958 India "had seized a large area of Chinese territory"

- beyond the McMahon Line “and had established the so called “Himalayan security system” in India’s north, aimed at China.”
- During the period from 1960-1970, India’s strategy of “expansion on two fronts” had both China and Pakistan as simultaneous targets of major operations and prepared for simultaneous operations along both the western and northern battle lines. This strategy had an approach of “attack to the west and defend to the north” where India would employ offensive posture against its western front against Pakistan and maintaining a defensive posture on its northern front against China. Post its defeat in 1962, India significantly enhanced its military capability through considerable expenditure on defence along with military aids from the US and the Soviet Union. The locus of India’s military strategy was to weaken Pakistan strategically and India managed to “dismember Pakistan at one blow” through a large scale attack in November 1971.
  - India’s military strategy, from 1970-80, is defined by “maintain dominance on land and control the sea”. After defeat of Pakistan in 1971 war, India’s dominance over South Asia had begun to take shape which was helped to some extent by amelioration of its relation with the US and China. By 1980s, India gradually shifted the focus of its strategy from the South Asian subcontinent to the Indian Ocean and “comprehensively sought superiority at sea over the northern Indian Ocean.”

In Chinese view, India’s military strategy underwent a major shift after the end of the Cold War. Since the traditional strategic concepts of war of the Cold War era—viz. annihilation of the enemy’s strength and occupation of its territory, etc.—were no longer valid India began in the early 1990s to execute the military strategy of ‘regional deterrence’ in its strategic area bound by Himalaya in north, Indian Ocean in south, Myanmar in east and Iran in west. The Science of Military Strategy (2013) argued that throughout the entire 1990s, “the core of India’s strategy of ‘regional deterrence’ was ‘denial’ {juzhi}, and it emphasized maintaining absolute military superiority over the countries within the South Asian subcontinent,

detering these from engaging in military adventures that would threaten India, and achieving such goals as ensuring the security of the nation's seacoasts and territorial waters and preventing major countries from infiltrating [the subcontinent].”

The Science of Military Strategy (2013) highlights further recalibration of India's military strategy in the 21st century as India's national power, due to rapid economic growth, “exceeded the sum total of the various other countries in South Asia”. India's ‘regional deterrence’ strategy transformed the passive defensive “thinking of ‘denial deterrence [*deterrence by denial*]’ into a pre-emptive strike-type idea of “disciplinary deterrence [deterrence by punishment] [sic]” which “emphasized taking the initiative to attack, acting before the enemy does, and doing its best to win a high-tech “limited conventional war” under conditions of nuclear deterrence [sic].” It further argues that India's strategic approach has discarded the passive defensive concept of “waiting for the enemy to arrive within [India's] borders and then getting rid of him” and has adopted an offensive concept of pre-emptive strikes to wage war on enemy's territory.

After tracing temporal evolution, the Science of Military Strategy (2013) highlights four interrelated basic characteristics in India's military strategy.<sup>103</sup>

- “A strong geopolitical nature” has been argued as the foremost characteristic of India's geopolitical thought and a key driver of national security and military strategy which stresses that “India is the heart of Asia and that the Indian Ocean is India's ocean”. In addition, India “has treated the South Asian subcontinent as its sphere of influence”, and considers “some neighbouring countries as the main obstacles” in realising its geopolitical ambitions. In Chinese view, elimination of these geopolitical obstacles remained “starting point and end point [sic]” of India's military strategy. India's geopolitical thinking has remained unchanged notwithstanding transformation of International security environment in the post-Cold War period. The angle of a geostrategic competition remains the basic factor in India's military strategy which constantly endeavours “to

build the South Asian subcontinent into a strategic foundation with India as the centre, and to thus manage and control the Indian Ocean [sic].”

- Second characteristic is “expansionist military strategic thought” which India’s had inherited as “the United Kingdom’s colonial political borders” at its independence. In Chinese view, India has “comprehensively carried on” with the United Kingdom’s imperial and expansionist approach treating South Asia and Indian Ocean as ‘security ring’ and “the illegally concocted McMahon Line and the Johnson-Ardagh Line as its ‘security inner ring’ [sic].”
- Inherently offensive nature has been identified as third characteristic of India’s military strategy. The Science of Military Strategy (2013) notes that “although India insists that it pursues a ‘defensive’ strategy, a series of military actions that it took since independence, including three India-Pakistan wars and its armed annexation of the kingdom of Sikkim, its instigation of the India-China border conflict, and its sending troops to Sri Lanka have all fully proven that its strategy has a distinctly offensive nature.” It further argues that the offensive nature of India’s strategy is restricted to the South Asian subcontinent and the Indian Ocean situation and India has limited capability “to fully prevent major countries outside this region from infiltrating” in the region. However, with the rapid rise of India’s national power and military power, this offensive nature has been increasing. In so far as India’s military strategy PRC is concerned, “India has adopted a defensive posture overall, but at the same time has also used offense as a defence to actively seek local superiority, and has also used its unremitting nibbling away in peacetime to create conditions for switching from defence to offense in wartime.”
- Fourth characteristic of India’s military strategy has been termed as “omni-directional deterrence”. It argues that due to inherent mismatch between India’s “ambition for dominance and its limited national power and military strength” has led to adoption a strategic approach of “omni-directional deterrence” which emphasises a tailored and calibrated deterrence posture

“against different target and along differing strategic directions. In regard to China, it has carried out ‘dissuasive’ deterrence, to deter China from using troops against India, and has restrained China from entering its sphere of influence. In regard to the small countries along the South Asian periphery, it has carried out ‘punitive’ deterrence” to compel them from going against India’s interest. In regards to the United States and China, India’s carries out “nuclear symmetry” deterrence.

The Science of Military Strategy (2013) argues that India’s broad strategic concept is to ‘discourage’ the United States, ‘deter’ China, and ‘deal with’ Pakistan. Among these, ‘deterring’ China is India’s primary focus, “because it thinks that only by ‘deterring’ China will it be able to ‘deal with’ Pakistan and have the possibility of ‘discouraging’ the United States.” Regarding future contour of India’s military strategy, it argues that

As India’s consciousness [of itself] as a great power grows stronger and as its overall national power and military strength continually grow, clues to the future developmental trends of its military strategy will gradually be revealed. The orientation of India’s strategic objectives may advance from regional dominance toward global participation, its strategic guidance will put more emphasis on active offense, its strategic deployments will be reflected more in its intentions to control the South Asian subcontinent and the Indian Ocean.<sup>104</sup>

The assessment of India’s evolving military strategy in the Science of Military Strategy (2013) broadly reflect persistent strands of rival image highlighted earlier i.e. India’s hegemonic aspirations; recognition of India’s strategic potential as a future threat; India’s propensity to align with the West. It also correlates with broader trends in Chinese strategic perceptions about India highlighted in the previous section. The trends and characteristics of India’s strategic approach, as highlighted in the Science of Military Strategy, appears to be an enduring analytical framework as it resonates in the blue

book series “Annual Reports on the Development of International Relations in the Indian Ocean Region” analysed in Chapters 3 & 4.

### **Chinese Public Perception of India**

The Chinese view of India, at societal level, has been broadly marked by ‘ambivalence’, ‘mutual suspicion’ and ‘lack of mutual awareness, understanding and trust.’<sup>105</sup> Among the few studies of India’s image in China, one Chinese study has compared the diverse perceptions in China about India. The study highlighted the differing attitudes towards India among various interest groups. For scholars and diplomats, the focus is to emphasise common interests with India and the necessity of being partners and good neighbours; for military and defence experts, India as a hostile neighbour is in geopolitical conflict with China and should be watched; and for the majority of the Chinese society there is a mainstream view in between, tending to recognise the rising status of India in a multipolar world, the great possibilities for both to work together on a global stage as well as the not-yet threat of Indian military enhancement.<sup>106</sup>

Examining the survey result of public perceptions about India in China, Yang Lu argued that just as the ‘China threat’ theory is gaining adherents in India, negative perception towards India has also been growing in China. The World Public Opinion Survey data from 2006 to 2012, conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs for the BBC World Service show that the Chinese view of India’s influence in the world is increasingly negative. Survey data of the Pew Global Attitudes project from 2005 to 2012 also showed a decline in India’s favourability amongst the Chinese.<sup>107</sup> On the India-China relationship, the Pew Report on China of October 2012 showed that 39 per cent of the Chinese viewed the India-China relationship as being based on cooperation, and 24 per cent saw it as being marked by hostility. In 2010, 53 per cent of the Chinese viewed the India-China relationship as marked by cooperation, and 9 per cent by hostility. On Chinese attitudes towards India’s economy the report shows that in 2012, 44 per cent of the Chinese viewed India’s growing economy as a good thing while 25 per cent saw it as a bad thing for China; in 2010, 60 per cent of the Chinese

viewed India's growing economy as a good thing for China whereas 13 per cent deemed it as a bad thing for China. In addition, 39 per cent of the Chinese viewed China's relationship with India as one of cooperation, down from 53 per cent since 2010. This is only slightly better than the Chinese view of Japan, which is that only 30 per cent of the Chinese saw relations between China and Japan as cooperative.<sup>108</sup> In 2015, favourable opinion about India in China further declined to 24 per cent.<sup>109</sup>

The latest opinion survey conducted by *Global Times* and China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), in August 2020 during the ongoing border standoff at Ladakh, showed that more than 70 per cent of participants believe that India is being too hostile against China and only 25 per cent of the participants are optimistic about bilateral relations as they believe "China-India ties will be improved in the long term." About 30 per cent of the participants see the border issue as the biggest obstacle in normalising relations between the two countries, while 24.5 per cent of them noted "interference from the US" as a key factor, and 10.7 per cent choose "competition between the two countries." Meanwhile, 66.4 per cent participants pointed that "India is following the US in containing China."<sup>110</sup> While the veracity of an opinion survey conducted by the Chinese government controlled media during a period of enhanced bilateral tension is always considered an exercise in mobilising domestic opinion, the trend of declining favourable opinion about India broadly correlates with previous opinion surveys by international agencies.

The Chinese media has an important role in shaping public perceptions. While overall state control on the content continues to exist, commercial competition has led to diversified content. The state media generally project a positive attitude in line with the government's position that India is a partner and a friend, whereas coverage of India in the market-oriented urban media and online media varies from moderate to negative. Negative stories and opinion about India tend to proliferate during periods of bilateral tensions. Chinese scholars attribute this negative coverage of India to nationalist sentiments or the choosing of various negative social

news of India to meet the readers/viewers' tastes. In addition, some negative media coverage is also a "tit-for-tat" of the Chinese media in reaction to negative reports on China in Indian media.<sup>111</sup>

In an authoritarian nation where exhibiting sentiments contrary to the party-state's policy remains uncommon, the Chinese have increasingly utilised the internet to express their views on various aspects of policy, including that towards India. An analysis of the online content of Chinese social media from 2006 to 2009 found significant negative stereotypes and prejudices about India in Chinese academic writing along with discussions in the online domain.<sup>112</sup> It argued that while there exists a general racist stereotype of India as poor and inferior, whether India will ever catch up with China one day is one of the hottest topics for the internet community. Not surprisingly, the dominant view is that India can never be compared with China in terms of economic development. India is also seen as a troublemaker for China that supports Tibetan separatists and eyes Chinese territory. For Chinese netizens generally, India does not pose a credible threat on its own. At the same time, there exists apprehension about encirclement being imposed by India on China in concert with Western powers. India's hegemonic aspirations and its attempt to control smaller neighbours in South Asia are also among the widely discussed topics. Chinese netizens are not overly passionate about the India-China strategic partnership. In times of peace, support for India-China friendship, if not a partnership, receives spontaneous positive attention. However, doubts about India-China friendship greatly increase when the issue of sovereignty is discussed. In addition, a majority of Chinese netizens also dismiss India as a capable ally. The study has argued that "Chinese netizens have made India their *bête noir* for their government. Their greatest fear and potential embarrassment are that India should overtake China in any way. At present, Chinese concern over any possible Indian direct aggression is less than that felt by Delhi, but that does not mean the Chinese treat the Indians casually."<sup>113</sup> Another study through content analysis by sampling discussion entries from Qiangguo Forum, argued that Chinese netizens see India as a rival far more than as an ally/partner.<sup>114</sup>

An exploration of Chinese online media content was undertaken during August-October 2014, a period coinciding with the visit of the Chinese President Xi Jinping to India from 17-19 September 2014. The study examined three online news content aggregators with different institutional characteristics: Sina News—China's biggest online news aggregator, Global Net—an international news-oriented newspaper produced by *People's Daily*, and Caixin Net—a well-known financial and economic news website. India's image on these three selected online news media was mainly negative (47 per cent), followed by neutral (30 per cent) and positive (23 per cent). India-China relations, military expansion (some with territory/border issues) and oddities in the Indian society were most reported topics. India was broadly portrayed as a 'neighbouring competitor' with a political or geopolitical agenda.<sup>115</sup>

Selina Ho pointed out that the impact of public opinion on Chinese policy decisions toward India should not be overstated. In her views, public opinion has greater consequences for Sino-American and Sino-Japanese relations than it does for India-China relations. The first two sets of relations tap into a visceral form of Chinese nationalism that is not found in the Chinese attitude toward India.<sup>116</sup> However, it needs to be noted that India is perhaps the only major nation that is perceived as culturally and socially inferior on one hand, but capable of offering a legitimate challenge to China with proven realist intention on the other, while there exists grudging respect for both the US and Japan. As per Simon Shen, the existence of the unfriendly image of India, a country perceived as being inferior, might suggest far-reaching implications for future India-China relations. He further argues that "any economic, military or territorial defeat by the Indians would be seen as an unacceptable face-loss for the Chinese nationalists and could have fatal consequences for the party-state. As a result, concessions are less likely to be made by Beijing towards Delhi than towards Washington, Tokyo or any developing nation in Africa."<sup>117</sup>

## Conclusion

In the past seven decades, geopolitical contexts of India-China dynamics have undergone significant changes. However, an intricate interplay of these four basic perceptual sinews—recognition of India's strategic potential as a future threat; an innate sense of China's civilisational superiority over India; India's propensity to align with the West; and India's hegemonic aspirations—has remained as a key factor in shaping the Chinese policy towards India. In essence, India-China interactions over a century or so before the late 1940s created sufficient conditions for the onset of rivalry. Later, this rivalry got escalated with China and India's competition for status at the apex of the Asian power hierarchy along with spatial dispute in defining the bilateral boundary. Even though the Chinese disdain for India was clearly evident in the aftermath of Beijing's easy victory in the 1962 war, China continues to remain wary of India's potential and her engagement with the US in the aftermath of 1962 war and later with the USSR.

Only for a brief period during the eighties, China's security concerns from India was moderated to some extent with perceived force correlation superiority of China over India. Even then, China continued its balancing approach towards India by supporting Pakistan to establish a strategic equipollence in South Asia as a safeguard for India's hegemonic aspirations. While India's nuclear test in 1998 significantly redefined the bilateral strategic equation, India's economic rise and Act East policy altered to some extent economic and diplomatic equations. In the broader geopolitical context, while India's rising strategic profile was being applauded, China's geopolitical situation had begun to cause anxiety. In this altered geopolitical context, India-China relations entered a better phase with both sides wanting to downplay the prospect of rivalry with emphasis on convergences and complementarity in their efforts to strengthen bilateral relations.

It would be pertinent to highlight that while there has been an effort to downplay the prospect of rivalry, strategic distrust continues to persist. Just as the 'China threat' theory is gaining adherents in India, negative perception towards India has also been

growing in China. While the Chinese declaratory policy continues to emphasise common interests and the necessity of being partners and good neighbours, India's growing diplomatic profile, strategic cooperation with major powers and growing military capability is being viewed as a serious strategic concern and a long-term threat to China. The Chinese have begun to acknowledge India's growing strategic profile and its impact on the security architecture of Asia.

Coming to the four basic strands of the Chinese mental and emotional image of India, India's strategic potential as a prospective threat to China's strategic interests still remains valid. At the same time, there exists a dominant belief that India's rise is more hype than substance and China's asymmetry in economic and military power will continue to grow in future, which reinforces civilisational conviction about China's superiority over India. Similarly, there exists apprehension about encirclement being imposed by India on China in concert with Western powers. Perceptions of India's hegemonic aspirations in South Asia and the Indian Ocean has exasperated China's perceived insecurity about its economic interests and extended SLOCs. As Minxin Pei has argued that "the combination of under-appreciation of India's achievement and exaggeration of India's role as a geopolitical rival" in the Chinese perceptions could generate dangerous self-reinforcing dynamics for intensification of strategic competition.<sup>118</sup>

## Notes

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### 3. Evolving Contours of Regional Geopolitics: An Assessment of Chinese Perspectives

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The simultaneous rise of India and China has been redefining Asia's geopolitical landscape. Spatial and status dimensions of competitive geopolitics in India-China dynamics have been characterised by strategic commentators as the 'New Great Game' in Asia.<sup>1</sup> According to David Scott, as China and India, both rising powers, are 'facing each other in the international system spatially and power wise,' their 'spatial perceptions of themselves and of the other' are shaping the nature of their geopolitical interactions.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Chris Ogden states that the geopolitical discourse between the two rising powers encapsulates elements of relative positioning, latent influence and status along with advantages and vulnerability that it may bring to their foreign policy and national security.<sup>3</sup>

As argued by Henry Kissinger and Joseph Nye, China's ascend to the apex of global hierarchy is not a rise but a 'return to a normal state of affairs' in line with its historical geopolitical identity.<sup>4</sup> China's strategic evolution is broadly categorised in "three distinct phases: consolidating within while seeking peace without (1978-91), accelerating global integration while preparing for new great-power threats (1991-2008), and claiming trusteeship of globalization while asserting international leadership (2008-present)."<sup>5</sup> The global financial crisis of 2008 provided a context and opportunity for China to shed its approach of maintaining a 'low profile' and to claim a leadership position at the global stage during the Hu Jintao period. This shift became

more pronounced with Xi Jinping's ascend to leadership and his quest for the Chinese dream.<sup>6</sup>

In the last three decades, there has been considerable intertwining of India and China's strategic geography. While China's economic and strategic interests have been expanding in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), India's Look East policy, which defined her economic engagement in Southeast and East Asia, has been transformed into the Act East policy with even sharper focus in the region that China calls its strategic periphery. China through its 21st Century Maritime Silk Road under the rubric of One Belt One Road (OBOR) has even further entrenched her economic and strategic interest. In C Raja Mohan's view, China and India might be condemned to step on each other's toes in their peripheral regions due to mistrust driven by mutual security dilemma.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter examines Chinese perceptions of regional geopolitics milieu and its evolution in the last decade. The chapter argues that while China's strategic interests have seen exponential expansion in recent times, China has been grappling to make sense of growing strategic complexity.

### **Evolving Geopolitical Milieu**

Similar to strategic analysts across the globe, Chinese scholars have been trying to make sense of the contemporary geopolitical flux in the international system and its implications for China. Their main contention is that the US' obstinate approach to preserve its prevalent hegemony has been preventing the transition of the international system towards multipolarity.

The "Annual Report on the Development of International Relations in the Indian Ocean Region" (2014), a part of the Blue Book series on the IOR, summarised the extant global situation as "One mainline, two main trends, and three centres."<sup>8</sup> Mainline refers to the conceptual wrangling between the unipolar and multipolar world order in ensuing geopolitical transition. The two main trends include a growing impetus for cooperation driven by "the interdependency brought about by globalisation" along with a confrontationist approach rooted in the Cold War-era realpolitik

of “zero-sum game.” The three centres of global geopolitics are North America and Europe; the Middle East and North Africa; and Asia. North America and Europe are still convulsing from the consequences of the global financial crisis of 2008. The Middle East and North Africa remain a centre of confrontation, chaos due to ongoing global partial war. As for Asia, while it has been identified as the third centre, it has been argued that it is East Asia that is essentially the engine of global economic growth.

In line with the prevalent ‘Asia Rising’ hypothesis, it has been argued that Asia today is at the cusp of reclaiming its historical greatness as it existed till 1820. However, Asia’s future rise remains constrained by the broader geopolitical struggle from a unipolar to a multipolar world along with territorial and sovereignty disputes in Asia. These disputes have been considered as key challenges in Asia’s future growth. Notable trends in the transformation of global economic structure include the progressive decline in America’s global hegemony since 1970 and the rise of China and India along with other emerging economies. By 2035, the Chinese economy is expected to surpass the US’s with India closing the gap in a rapid manner.<sup>9</sup> It has been observed that the primary source of ‘perceived threat’ to the US are these trends towards a multipolar world and the prospects of the decentralised political balance of power in the future.

In the Chinese view, at the root of US-China hostility lies the US perception of China as a challenger to American hegemony. The rapid development of China’s economy along with significant enhancement in the political and economic strength of China has been ‘fretting, even frightening.’ This threat perception has led the US to construct a ‘China threat’ theory to malign China.<sup>10</sup> Similar envious perception in ‘some foreign countries’ has made the ‘China threat’ theory a key point to maliciously attack China.<sup>11</sup> The US’ strategic rebalance efforts through a ‘Pivot to Asia’ policy has been characterised as an effort to contain China in order to preserve its hegemonic influence in the Asia-Pacific. In the Chinese assessment, this rebalancing approach of the US has induced a hedging tendency in many countries in the region “since they want to enjoy the United

States 'safe haven' and at the same time share 'bonus' of China's economic growth."<sup>12</sup>

Chinese scholars opine that triangular dynamics between China, India and the US are key factors in the evolving power structure in the Asia-Pacific. From the Chinese perspective, India's position in this strategic triangle is a key variable. It has been observed that the rapid development of China and India in the past two decades has transformed the regional power balance in the West Pacific Ocean and the IOR, and has challenged the dominant position of the US in the region. In their view, although the US rebalancing is currently targeted against China, the US "will strengthen the rebalancing with China and India" in the future. Even though China-India and China-US relations have had 'open and secret' struggles, there existed an expectation during the Obama administration about the possibility of "new relations between big powers in and out of the region."<sup>13</sup>

However, Chinese perceptions of the US' antagonism towards China have progressively become more accentuated. An argument began to emerge that "the formation of 'quasi-consensus' and 'quasi-alliance' between the United States and many other countries is weakening the influence of China over the years on the surrounding countries, and containing the ability of China to take the initiative to build the surrounding environment." In the Chinese perspective, while it would difficult for the US to achieve 'quasi-isolation' of China, the US' intervention in China's immediate periphery cannot be ignored.<sup>14</sup> During the Trump administration, Obama's strategic policy towards China of 'engage and contain' changed to a 'contain and confront' strategy. It became apparent that China has been "clearly identified as a competitor and rival, and the original cooperation has been replaced by complete containment and hostility."<sup>15</sup>

The emerging architecture of the Quadrilateral (Quad) alignment between the United States, India, Japan and Australia is viewed by China as a threat. In the Chinese assessment, the US strategy towards China has turned 'from defensive deterrence to an offensive one.' The US endeavour towards forging a strategic alliance with India, Japan and Australia aims to enhance the credibility of deterrence

with the ultimate objective of strategic containment of China.<sup>16</sup> Chinese scholars state that in some countries perceptual anxiety with ‘the rise of China’ gets balanced by the broader perception in the region about ‘discontinuity of the US’ foreign policy.’ In the Chinese assessment, “the region would like to see the two powers to be counterbalanced by each other, for the sake of a stable Asia.”<sup>17</sup>

There exists a clear realisation in China that the prevalence of the ‘China threat’ theory has significantly impacted its geopolitical image and its geopolitical milieu has become complicated due to evolving strategic alignments to counter China. Notwithstanding these potential challenges, two broad conclusions about the future contours of Asian geopolitics continue to resonate in all five volumes of the annual report.

One is that Asia will retain continued economic growth, as the preservation of Asia’s status as a centre of economic growth is something that not only Asia needs, it is something the whole world needs too; the second conclusion is that the main countries and international communities in the world today do not want to make the Asian region chaotic, and thus break off the momentum of Asia’s economic growth because this would not suit their fundamental interests.<sup>18</sup>

It would be pertinent to highlight that India’s progressive tilt towards the US has been noted in all five volumes of the annual report and it has been repeatedly argued that the US has been muddling the efforts for improvement in India-China relations in order to preserve its hegemonic dominance.

### **Indo-Pacific—Strategic Connotations and Implications**

Notwithstanding China’s stated aversion towards the Indo-Pacific construct, the broader implication of the Indo-Pacific construct has generated significant intellectual inquiry in China. The Annual Report (2018) has highlighted that Chinese scholars have published more than 100 papers on the Indo-Pacific concept in Chinese peer reviewed journals from 2013 to early 2018. This targeted research has focussed on the approaches of the US, Japan, India and

Australia in shaping the geopolitical discourse about the Indo-Pacific construct and aims to identify suitable countermeasures for China.<sup>19</sup> Since 2017, the keywords of Indo-Pacific research in China have changed from “Indo-Pacific concept” to “Indo-Pacific strategy,” which “reflects the gradual deepening of the Indo-Pacific study in the academic circles in China, and also indicates the consensus on the transformation of “Indo-Pacific” from concept to practice.”<sup>20</sup>

While the conceptual framework of the Indo-Pacific construct is explored in the Annual Report (2014) and is briefly mentioned in the 2015 report, it became the main theme in the Annual Report (2018). A rather comprehensive analysis of the Indo-Pacific concept and its implications figure in the Annual Report (2018), which notes the progressive mainstreaming of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ idea in “three stages of evolution as a geographical concept, a geopolitical concept, and a specific policy initiative.”<sup>21</sup> While there continues to exist a healthy scepticism about the durability and effectiveness of the Indo-Pacific concept, namely, it is just “old wine in old bottles” hyping US hegemony or more out of “strategic flickering” which is “like a bubble, gone with a poke,”<sup>22</sup> at the same time there is an acute realisation that the Indo-Pacific strategy negatively impacts China’s regional strategic interests and can no longer be ignored.

In the Annual Report (2014), Cuiping Zhu has argued that Indo-Pacific is a new geopolitical concept, which “derives from rising of emerging market economies such as China and India, from the huge potential of trade, investment, and energy supply in this region, and from globally strategic considerations of America sustaining its influence in Indo-Pacific region.”<sup>23</sup> She further argues that policies of the major powers—America’s ‘Asia-Pacific Rebalancing strategy’, India’s ‘Look East’ policy and Australia’s ambition to be an ‘axis power’ in her two-ocean strategy—have contributed towards shaping the Indo-Pacific idea. The Annual Report (2015) highlights the objective trend of growing economic linkages between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific and argues that “whether China raises the Belt and Road strategic vision or not, the objective trend the economic linkages between these two regions (Indian Ocean and Western Pacific) will be continuously deepened.”<sup>24</sup>

In the Chinese assessment, the broad contours of the Indo-Pacific strategy aim at creating a region-wide security link by enhancing India's strategic profile in the maritime region of East Asia and "to make the Indian Navy custodians of Indo-Pacific Ocean channel (including the South China Sea, Malacca and the Pacific of wider range); to construct the northwest coast of Australia into force projection point (*sic*) towards the western Pacific and the eastern Indian Ocean."<sup>25</sup> Through constant reiteration of the 'China threat' theory along with efforts to construct Indo-Pacific wide security linkages, "the United States [is] not merely creating a more intense atmosphere in this region, but also intensifying strategic competition to further promote [a] changing pattern in Asia-Pacific, and increasing complicatedness around China."<sup>26</sup>

It has been argued that given the Chinese strategic and economic interest, China's strategic approach towards the Indo-Pacific Regions has progressively evolved in order to seek a peaceful and stable surrounding environment. In her book *India's Ocean*, Cuiping Zhu points to the growing geopolitical competition shaping the Indo-Pacific concept. She posits that whether due to the US' Pivot Strategy, India's 'Act East' Policy, China's 'Go West' Strategy or Australia's intention to promote its regional influence based on its unique geopolitical advantages, "the strategic interest space" of regional powers has been expanding continuously and overlapping to a certain extent, and "[has] triggered strategic competition of great powers in the Indo-Pacific area."<sup>27</sup>

In order to understand the geopolitical implications of the Indo-Pacific concept, Chinese scholars have researched the concept from multiple perspectives, drawing inferences from broader academic deliberations and official articulations of key sponsor's, that is, the US, Japan, India and Australia. Chinese scholars point to following the main characteristics of the Indo-Pacific idea.

- First, while there exist differing perceptions about the geographical limits of Indo-Pacific, there are no major differences in its general scope and core areas.<sup>28</sup> In Chinese academic perceptions, the geographical span of the Indo-Pacific concept refers specifically to the vast waters of the Western Pacific and

the entire Indian Ocean with a strategic focus on the South China Sea and the Bay of Bengal.<sup>29</sup>

- Second, there is deliberate ambiguity in the strategic design that indicates “flexibility in the connotation of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ concept.”<sup>30</sup> This ambiguity provides ‘the concept creator and definer’ (i.e., US, Japan, India and Australia) an opportunity for its strategic expansion through co-opting ‘like-minded countries’ in the framework, taking advantage of Asian countries’ concerns about China.<sup>31</sup>
- Third, while the geo-economic pattern in the Indo-Pacific region has gradually changed since 1990, it has been primarily driven by China. Even though China is being considered an outlier in the Indo-Pacific construct, in essence, China is a ‘maintainer of the geo-economic order’ in the Indo-Pacific region and the most important ‘extra-territorial contributor’ of the regional economy. In the Chinese view, The US, Japan, Europe and other Indo-Pacific Strategy participants Australia and India are challengers of existing geo-economic order in the ‘Indo-Pacific’ region.<sup>32</sup>
- Fourth, the Indo-Pacific construct is aimed against China.<sup>33</sup> The broad strategic design of the Indo-Pacific contains comprehensive strategies for containment of China—politically, diplomatically and militarily.<sup>34</sup> The primary objective of the Indo-Pacific construct is to create an “Asian NATO” and “Indo-Pacific strategic arc” against China.<sup>35</sup> The Indo-Pacific concept, supported by quadrilateral cooperation between the US, India, Japan and Australia, aims to prevent China from becoming the sole provider of infrastructure products and the leading power in the regions.<sup>36</sup>
- Fifth, the Indo-Pacific concept has gained prominence only through active promotion by the US, especially during the Trump administration. Sans definitive policy articulations of the Trump administration, the Indo-Pacific had largely remained a “self-comforting concept created by a few politicians and scholars in Japan, Australia and India.”<sup>37</sup> The initiative manifests the Cold War mentality of the US of fostering regional tension and maintaining power balance.<sup>38</sup> To prevent the emergence of a

‘China-led Asia’, the US aims to undermine “China’s regional leadership by promoting the Indo-Pacific multi-polarisation.”<sup>39</sup>

- Sixth, the Indo-Pacific construct aims to enhance India’s strategic profile as a regional balancer. India, with its rising strength and geographical advantage, is an important strategic partner for the US in its efforts to contain China. India’s role is being played up since it can squeeze China’s strategic space in the Indian Ocean and pressurise China on the South China Sea issue.<sup>40</sup> The Indo-Pacific Strategy broadly confirms with India’s strategic pursuit to enhance regional and even global influence.<sup>41</sup> However, Chinese scholars also note India’s ambivalence on the Indo-Pacific idea and its preference for strategic autonomy, which constrains India from establishing a military alliance with the US.

In the Chinese view, while the Indo-Pacific idea has been a ‘hot topic’ in the academic and diplomatic discourse since 2007, a more crystallised version of the Indo-Pacific concept as ‘Indo-Pacific 2.0’ has only begun to emerge from 2015 onwards with the gradual shift of the construct from concept to strategy formulation.<sup>42</sup> Chinese Scholars have discerned concerted efforts in 2017 towards the strategic implementation of this geopolitical concept and have identified five key indicators towards this.<sup>43</sup>

- First, the US approach towards the Indo-Pacific construct moved from a conceptual framework towards clear strategic formulation. This was clearly evident in three key strategic publications released by the US in 2017-18, that is, National Security Strategy, National Defence Strategy and the Nuclear Situation Review. In the US strategy for the Indo-Pacific idea, China was not only identified as a major strategic competitor but was also described as a revisionist power undermining peace, stability and economic order in the Indo-Pacific region. In order to cope with this threat from China, strengthening alliance frameworks and building new strategic partnerships remains a key focus area for the US.
- Second, India’s stance on the Indo-Pacific changed from being a cautious observer to a key participant. India abandoned its

cautious attitude on the Indo-Pacific construct with expectation of strategic and economic benefits from the construct in her great power aspiration. The structural contradiction in India-China relations offered India a strong motivation to become a key participant in this initiative.

- Third, the US, Japan and India have begun to actively coordinate their strategic approach. The Indo-US strategic partnership and military cooperation significantly accelerated under the Trump presidency, and promotion of strategic stability in the Indo-Pacific became a major common strategic objective. The convergence of strategic interests between the two countries was further evidenced with the institutionalisation of a 2+2 dialogue format that aimed to bring greater synergy in their diplomacy and security policies. Chinese scholars have keenly watched the progress of the strategic partnership between India and Japan since both countries have territorial disputes with China, and both have maintained very close partnership with the US. It was noted that India-Japan strategic cooperation has significantly strengthened under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi and Prime Minister Abe with significant strategic convergence between Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy and India's 'Act East' policy. During the ASEAN India Summit in December 2017, India invited Japan "to unite Japan and ASEAN countries against China's Belt and Road Initiative."<sup>44</sup> In addition to providing assistance to India for internal development, Japan also actively worked with India in shaping the Asia Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) initiative, a competing framework against China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) projects in Africa.
- Fourth, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between the United States, Japan, India and Australia has restarted. While a complex geopolitical game to constrain China through the Indo-Pacific construct has been evident through Japan's 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific' strategy, India's proactive 'Act East' policy, the US defining China as a strategic competitor and Australia's attempt to isolate China, the most clear indication of operationalisation of the Indo-Pacific construct from concept

to reality, from the Chinese perspective, was the re-initiation of Quad consultation among the four major sponsors of the Indo-Pacific construct in August 2017.

- Fifth, a ‘strategic speculation’ (hedging) and ‘rent-seeking’ approach among small and medium countries has become pronounced. The Indo-Pacific construct has strengthened the geopolitical status of island and peninsula countries at strategic locations in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, and has made them the most direct beneficiary in the geopolitical economy. Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore and even the entire ASEAN have begun to take advantage of their geographical locations or special attributes for geopolitical power rent-seeking.

These geopolitical trends towards the operational implementation of the Indo-Pacific construct have exacerbated China’s security concerns in its strategic periphery in the South China Sea, and are also seen as an obstacle in China’s westward expansion in the IOR. Chinese scholars argue that the Indo-Pacific poses a significant challenge to China’s peripheral security in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea and the East China Sea.<sup>45</sup> A ‘free and open Indo-Pacific’ strategy within the Indo-Pacific is increasing the difficulty for China to safeguard its right in the South China Sea.<sup>46</sup> There is growing concern that the Indo-Pacific strategy could prevent the westward advancement of China’s OBOR Initiative.<sup>47</sup> In addition, China’s efforts for regional economic integration have become complicated due to strategic speculation and the rent-seeking approach of small and medium-sized countries in the Indo-Pacific region. It has been argued that the “Indo-Pacific construct will not only expose China to the strategic pressure brought by the ‘hegemonic threat’ from this region but will also have a ‘tearing’ impact on China’s promotion of economic integration, as well as the ‘isolating’ impact on the common security concept between China and neighbouring countries.”<sup>48</sup> Chinese scholars also find the Indo-Pacific initiative an apt illustration of Cold War mentality, which, in their view, is inconsistent with the basic characteristics of the current international situation.<sup>49</sup>

Notwithstanding the strategic concerns highlighted above, Chinese scholars also point towards potential benefits to China from the Indo-Pacific framework. Since the Indo-Pacific strategy aims to enhance economic and strategic linkages between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, it actually facilitates China's strategic engagements in the Indian Ocean and makes China's presence in the IOR legal and legitimate.<sup>50</sup> Further, the construct provides opportunities for China for strengthening cooperation with Indo-Pacific littorals and appropriately expand the maritime rights and strategic space to serve the construction of "Belt and Road," especially the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.<sup>51</sup>

In order to cope with the Indo-Pacific idea, Chinese scholars have explored a range of economic, political and military options. It has been argued that China should persevere with strategic determination and an appropriate policy response needs to be formulated based on the progress of the Indo-Pacific construct. It has been said that there is no immediate requirement "for preventive diplomacy, especially for the so-called division and disintegration" against the concept of the Indo-Pacific. Rather China should use diplomatic and economic leverage to hedge the Indo-Pacific concept through cooperation with South Asia and Southeast Asian countries. Accordingly, China should primarily use economic means to counter the 'Indo-Pacific strategy.' However, such an approach would need to be supplemented by necessary military preparations.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, pointing to positive factors of geo-economy in the Indo-Pacific construct, some Chinese scholar argue that "China should actively explore and accelerate the economic engagement with the Indian Ocean and the Pacific littorals and address 'security dilemma' in geopolitics with geo-economy" in order to shape the emerging regional order in its favour.<sup>53</sup>

### **Geopolitical Theatre of South Asia and the Indian Ocean**

As highlighted earlier, while South Asia and the Indian Ocean have progressively emerged as a key area for China's strategic and economic expansion, some Chinese scholars lament that China has not given adequate attention to the region. They argue that Chinese

leaders and academics have been too preoccupied with immediate strategic challenges and economic opportunity in the Western Pacific.<sup>54</sup> According to the scholars, the lack of academic reflection on the geopolitical pattern of South Asia as a geopolitical system is a “structural embarrassment,” for China which has resulted in ‘realistic problem response capability’ being low.<sup>55</sup> Encumbered by strategic challenges in the Western Pacific and also due to the diplomatic mentality of keeping a low profile, “Chinese leaders rarely articulated China’s strategic interests over the Indian Ocean and have even lacked a targeted and clear overall strategic approach towards South Asia and the Indian Ocean. These have contributed to China’s strategic challenges becoming progressively acute and difficult to deal with.”<sup>56</sup> It has been highlighted that China’s strategic challenges in South Asia and the Indian Ocean will further accentuate in the near future. Therefore, China needs to maintain a sharp focus on South Asia and the Indian Ocean at present and in the foreseeable future.<sup>57</sup>

In explaining the strategic relevance of South Asia and the Indian Ocean, Chinese scholars have heavily drawn from the classical geopolitical theorists i.e. Mackinder, Mahan and Spykman. Basing their arguments on Mackinder’s ‘Heartland Theory’ and Nicholas Spykman’s ‘Rimland Theory,’<sup>58</sup> Chinese scholars consider the Indian Ocean and South Asia as a unitary geopolitical theatre due to ‘the natural security association’ and highlight the region’s immense economic and strategic significance to China.<sup>59</sup> It has been argued that South Asia has a significant strategic value, both in geopolitics and geo-economics, due to its self-enclosed geographic characteristics. In addition, the combination of continental and maritime geography makes South Asia a critical geopolitical bridge both for easy access to oceans and for providing strategic depth for penetrating into the Eurasian heartland. Relying on the South Asian subcontinent, the sea powers can use South Asia as a stepping from south to north, and drive straight into Central Asia, the Eurasian heartland, thereby affecting East Asia, West Asia and even Europe. Similarly, since South Asia commands vital waterways of Asia and Oceania to Europe and Africa, is close to the oil production area in the Persian Gulf and overlooks the important oil channel for

the West and the East, it can act as a springboard for expansion of national power into the sea for commanding critical sea lanes.<sup>60</sup> The strategic paths of controlling the world in the above mentioned classical geopolitical theories remain at the core of the Chinese understanding of South Asia, whether in terms of “controlling the sea by land” as per Mackinder or by “controlling the land by sea” in accordance with the Mahanian prescription. South Asia and the Indian Ocean are viewed both as a springboard of the Chinese outward expansion and as a barrier for containing the Chinese outreach to wider Eurasia.

Geographically, Chinese scholars point to three key features of South Asia. First, South Asia is a convergence zone of Southeast Asia, West Asia and Central Asia, and is adjacent to the west of China, which is separated by the Himalayas from the Asian continent. Second, geographically South Asia is a relatively independent unit at the centre of the Indian Ocean with access to the Bay of Bengal to the east and the Arabian Sea to the west. Third, India dominates South Asia due to centrality of location and continental size. In addition, the peninsular geography of India enhances its influence in the Indian Ocean due easy to access to both the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. Geographical insularity of South Asia with the ‘natural geographical barrier’ of the Himalayas in the north and Indian Ocean to the south provides India with “an advantage to achieve its strategic goal of being a great power by relying on the whole of South Asia.”<sup>61</sup>

For China, India has always been and continues to be the proverbial ‘elephant in the room’ in South Asia and Indian Ocean’s geopolitical landscape.<sup>62</sup> Chinese scholars state that due to its favourable geographical and geopolitical advantage, India has always endeavoured to maintain this region as its exclusive sphere of influence in accordance with an Indian version of the ‘Monroe Doctrine.’<sup>63</sup> China’s interaction with South Asia has been significantly hampered by limited connectivity and rather adversarial dynamics with India. During the Cold War, a rather tenuous balance in South Asia was maintained by Pakistan, which has kept ‘strategic equipollence’ by virtue of near military power parity and

its geographic locations on either flank of India. However, India, through fragmentation of Pakistan in 1971, further enhanced its dominance on South Asia. Even after fragmentation and the creation of Bangladesh, Pakistan remained a major factor in the regional balance and posed a significant constraint to India's domination of South Asia through strategic alignment with the US and an 'all-weather strategic partnership' with China. During the Cold War and even its immediate aftermath, China's interaction with South Asia remained limited other than its strategic relationship with Pakistan.<sup>64</sup> South Asia and the Indian Ocean had limited influence on the Chinese geopolitical thinking due to their relative isolation as a closed geopolitical system.<sup>65</sup>

In the 21st century, South Asia and the Indian Ocean have emerged as a key strategic region in global geopolitics due to the robust growth of India's economy and national power, the shift of global geopolitical locus to Asia, the growing strategic interest of major powers concern about international terrorism resulting from regime instability and the expanding maritime trade and related concern of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) security.<sup>66</sup> With a growing strategic profile, the region has become an arena of an intense geopolitical great game with complicated interplay of strategic manoeuvre through competitive and cooperative interaction.<sup>67</sup> South Asia and the Indian Ocean progressively began to emerge as a key factor in China's external strategy due to the following strategic imperatives:<sup>68</sup>

- First, the interest relates to the security of SLOCs, which carries 80 per cent of China's external trade. Of the four directions of China's SLOCs, the Indian Ocean SLOC is most important since it connects China to its key trade destination in Europe on one hand and China's largest energy import source in the Middle East on the other. Therefore, whether for foreign trade or the energy, the SLOCs of the Indian Ocean have become genuinely vital sea lanes of communication for China.
- Second, the emerging markets of South Asia and the Indian Ocean littorals have huge economic significance for Chinese trade and investments for the future growth of China.

- Third, China's 'Westward Advance' through the Belt and Road Initiative hinges on key connectivity projects in South Asia, which includes the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, both of which provide China with access to the Indian Ocean.
- Fourth, South Asia is a near strategic periphery for China not only for the economic development of its southern and western provinces but also to ensure stability in Sinkiang and Tibet.

In essence, South Asia and the IOR have emerged as a key region of geopolitical salience for the Belt and Road strategy and peripheral diplomacy of China as well as for the stability of west border areas of China and maritime transportation safety of the Indian Ocean. Chinese scholars have argued that China must actively continue to engage in the region to seek a 'breakthrough on geo-strategy' in the region. "China needs to further optimise its strategic planning and strategic action in order to strengthen its geopolitical influence and security role in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region."<sup>69</sup>

In the Chinese view, although India's economic rise has been a key factor in raising the strategic profile of the region in the 21st century, the regional economic and security structure has remained fragile. The India-Pakistan imbroglio has imperilled progress on regional cooperation in SAARC. Lack of a regional connectivity network has hampered trickle-down benefits from India's economic rise to its South Asian neighbourhood, which has remained backward and underdeveloped. At the same time, the twin factors of India's inability to meet the economic aspirations and security requirement of its neighbours and concern among the neighbours about India's hegemonic aspirations have encouraged them to seek cooperation from external actors.<sup>70</sup>

In the 21st century, while China's renewed efforts for enhanced diplomatic and economic engagement began with India, it progressively diversified to other South Asian countries as well. At the same time, China also initiated a regional connectivity initiative to improve trade flow from China to South Asia and also to connect Yunan and Xinjiang to the wider Indian Ocean trade network.

Chinese scholars state that the traditional geopolitical thinking that is prevalent in India, which is rooted in ‘Monroeism,’ has caused it to misperceive China’s economic outreach as an encroachment on its traditional sphere of influence.<sup>71</sup> They also argue that the Indian strategic community has misrepresented China’s infrastructure project in the Indian Ocean as a ‘string of pearls’ construct that aims to constrain India. This geopolitical imagination of perceived threat from China lies at the core of India’s obstructionist approach towards OBOR.<sup>72</sup>

In their assessments of contemporary geopolitical contours in South Asia and the IOR, Chinese scholars point to the following key issues:

- In the regional power structure, the centrality of India has become more prominent. With economic growth coupled with the enhancement of military capability, India has expanded her dominance in South Asia. India has emerged as a prominent naval power in the Indian Ocean and seeks to increase its global influence by getting control over the Indian Ocean.<sup>73</sup> With its growing strategic and economic prospects, India’s attractiveness to other countries in the region has significantly enhanced and they “not only want to share the benefits obtained from the Indian economic growth but also expect India to play the role of ‘Balancer of China.’”<sup>74</sup>
- With growing asymmetry between India and other countries, the regional order in South Asia has become more unbalanced. As India has moved far ahead of Pakistan in aspects of economic level and scale, international weight and military power, the strategic equipollence between the two countries no longer exists and Pakistan has lost the ability to counterbalance India within the South Asia region.<sup>75</sup> As a regional core, India has strengthened its comparative advantage.<sup>76</sup> Other countries in South Asia have shown unprecedented preference to side with India in estranging Pakistan.<sup>77</sup>
- While the strategic profile of South Asia has significantly enhanced within the Indo-Pacific, the regional power structure has become even more asymmetric. In sharp contrast to India’s

enhanced strategic profile, Pakistan's position is becoming more and more perilous. The strategic importance of Sri Lanka and the Maldives has considerably increased, but the Indo-Pacific construct has ignored the inland areas of Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh. Sri Lanka has elicited significant outreach from great powers due to her strategic geography and the competitive struggle for influence in Sri Lanka will be more complicated and fiercer in the future.<sup>78</sup>

- Continuous fermentation of 'three chronic illnesses' involving a constant confrontation between India and Pakistan, the Afghanistan turmoil, and the spectre of ever-present threat from terrorism along with the interweaving of 'two security challenges' of traditional and non-traditional issues continue to define the fragile regional security situation in South Asia.<sup>79</sup>
  - India and Pakistan seem to be locked in intractable conflict due to the legacy issues of history and strategic trust deficit. A zero-sum game approach by the two nuclear powers and the persistent security dilemma has "pulverised their space of peaceful coexistence and joint development" with the constant risk of traditional conflict. Rather surprisingly and contrary to the official position of China, Chinese scholars acknowledge that Pakistan has been using asymmetric means to reduce strategic cost and prolong confrontations with India.<sup>80</sup>
  - Afghanistan has been characterised as a country "with the weakest political structure, the most dangerous security status, and the worst survival environment among the South Asian countries."<sup>81</sup> Internal turmoil in Afghanistan poses significant spill over risks across the border. Rather than being a barrier against such a spill over, Pakistan is becoming a battlefield of intensified conflict between extremism and the secularism force.<sup>82</sup> These risks are likely to amplify in the future with the impending US withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>83</sup>
  - In addition to the spectre of interstate conflict, South Asia also faces severe threats from a combination of international

terrorism and religious extremism represented by the 'Islamic State' and 'Al-Qaeda' and the regional religious extremism forces represented by the Taliban. Some Chinese scholars have argued that a lack of consensus and political will among South Asian countries have prevented a resolute policy response in dealing with cross-border terrorism.<sup>84</sup>

- China remains concerned with the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan because of the serious risk it poses to internal stability in Xinjiang. Terrorism and violent separatism in Afghanistan and Pakistan and their growing linkages with international terrorism are a serious concern to China for they pose a direct threat to the Chinese people or facilities in Pakistan and hamper the progress of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects.<sup>85</sup>
- The growing expansion of Afghanistan-centred drug production and sales network is seen as a serious challenge. It has been observed that China has become 'one of the victims tortured by Afghanistan drug.' Drug trade and terrorism have obvious linkages since profits from the drug trade are one of the key sources of funds for terrorism.<sup>86</sup>
- With the growing strategic profile of South Asia and the Indian Ocean, geopolitical jostling and competitive struggle for influence have intensified in the region.<sup>87</sup> In the Chinese perception, China's rise and its growing engagements in South Asia and the IOR have made the "US anxious, Japan distressed, and India jealous."<sup>88</sup> The US, Japan and India have intensified their diplomatic overtures for enhancing strategic and economic engagement. Russia has also returned to the region and is making efforts to revive its presence.<sup>89</sup>

Among other things, a major concern for China are the concerted efforts by some countries to shape the strategic narrative against China through propagations of 'China threat' polemics that characterise China's economic and infrastructure initiatives in the region as a 'predatory economic practice.' In addition, international

discourse is also being shaped through concepts of ‘transparency, democracy, public participation and civil society inclusion’ in alternative connectivity projects and aid initiatives. Even though such projects have remained mere slogans, these efforts aim to create uncertainty in the minds of people in the region by highlighting weaknesses in OBOR projects. This geopolitical jostling has significantly constrained China’s strategic engagement in the region and has also enhanced political risks and economic cost in the implementation of OBOR.<sup>90</sup>

As a key region for China’s strategic and economic expansion, South Asia and the IOR have attracted significant intellectual attention from Chinese scholars. As highlighted above, along with geo-economic imperatives of trade and investment and maritime security challenges related to SLOC protection, China’s internal stability concerns in its periphery are key drivers for its strategic engagement. Given the vexing nature of India-China relations, India’s growing strategic profile in the region has been seen as a serious strategic complication. At the same time, Pakistan’s progressively perilous situations have also been noted. China remains concerned with the violent extremism and drug problem in Afghanistan and Pakistan and its potential challenges to China’s own internal instability. However, growing geopolitical competition among the major powers and a concerted pushback to China’s expansion efforts in the region have been identified as its foremost strategic challenge.

Chinese scholars have pointed that the fragile strategic milieu in the Indian Ocean is even more unstable given the structural contradiction and lack of trust between great powers such as China, the US, Japan and India in the Indian Ocean.<sup>91</sup> Incompatibility in the strategic objectives and interests among major powers makes strategic escalation inevitable. The key challenge will be how to manage strategic tension and maintain a situation of “fighting but never breaking up.”<sup>92</sup>

### **China’s Evolving Geopolitical Perceptions**

While there exists broader continuity in the arguments in the five volumes of the Annual Report, a closer reading indicates progressive

evolution of the Chinese perceptions about challenges and opportunities in South Asia and the IOR from 2014 to 2018. Based on their assessment of geopolitical developments, Chinese scholars have constantly recalibrated their views. This section highlights key trends in China's shifting perceptions of regional geopolitics. Even though the annual reports have consistently argued that South Asia and the IOR have progressively emerged as a key strategic region for China, these reports also indicate a pattern of evolving perceptions.

### **South Asia and IOR—Not a Core Region Yet**

The Annual Report (2014) argued that notwithstanding the growing geopolitical salience from strategic and economic perspectives, the region had not yet emerged as 'the core region' but at best could be described as a 'probable important region in the future.' While extra-regional powers enhanced their strategic and economic engagements, the region remained peripheral to their broader strategic interest. It was the overall transformation of China's diplomatic thought and not "the ranking enhancement" of the region that resulted in an aggressive policy which drove its enhanced engagement in South Asia and the IOR.<sup>93</sup>

While there was broad continuity in the Chinese perceptions about US-China dynamics, the US was portrayed as a declining hegemon besieged with the Cold War mentality to contain China in the Indo-Pacific region. At the same time, there was also a perceptible shift in Beijing's assessment of potential strategic implications of US-China competition on China's engagement in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. The Annual Report (2014) notes that growing Indo-US strategic cooperation shaped the geopolitical landscape in the region. At the same time, there was also a perceptible shift in Beijing's assessment of potential strategic implications of US-China competition on China's engagement in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. Even though the US was seen as a declining power besieged with multiple conflicts in Asia, it remained a preeminent naval power providing key assurance of uninterrupted maritime trade flow. Similarly, it also notes the coordinated approach of the US and Japan for economic and strategic engagement in order to

counter China's outreach in the Bay of Bengal in general and in Myanmar in particular.

It was observed that Myanmar was progressively opening to other powers rather than solely relying on China. In addition, China-Myanmar relations were under significant strain with the manifestation of various discords and conflicts. Suspension of the Myitsone dam and the rise of anti-China sentiments are cited as examples of this progressive strain.<sup>94</sup> However, the Annual Report (2014) states that "in spite of the influence of other countries and strong independence in Myanmar's foreign policy," Myanmar's strategic dependence on China was likely to continue.<sup>95</sup>

As highlighted earlier, the Indo-Pacific construct had begun to be perceived as a strategic design of the US to contain China in conjunction with the 'Pivot to Asia' policy. While intensification of the strategic competition of power and influence in the Indo-Pacific region in the future remained a possibility, the report noted that insufficient evidence existed in this regard in 2014.<sup>96</sup> There existed, however, a hope that a geopolitical modus vivendi through a G-2 partnership between China and the US could still emerge.

## **OBOR in South Asia and the IOR**

The subsequent reports from 2015 onwards indicate a rather drastic shift towards establishing South Asia and the IOR as a locus of China's strategic and economic interest, both from perspectives drawn from geopolitical theory, as highlighted earlier, as well as the assessment of broader geopolitical trends in the region. According to The Annual Report (2015), South Asia and the Indian Ocean was the key region for the implementation of the OBOR strategy, particularly the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. While the report, on the whole, justified usual win-win arguments about OBOR being a gamechanger for the region, China and the overall world economy, it also highlighted plenty of caveats about the future potential of this ambitious venture from economic perspectives along with challenges of geopolitical uncertainty from strategic perspectives.

Chinese scholars remained circumspect about the realisation of projected trade potential of OBOR in South Asia due to the possibility

of overall decline in global trade, sluggish economic growth in the region and the imbalance and the structural gaps in regional trade.<sup>97</sup> Growing antagonism of the US, India's ambivalence bordering on an obstructionist approach along with growing mistrust about China's strategic intentions were noted as significant political risks, which were further compounded by security risks in the region originating from regime instability in some countries and the broader threat from terrorism and piracy.<sup>98</sup> There also existed acknowledgement of prevailing lack of trust in Southeast Asia and South Asia towards China, which could prove impediments in progressing OBOR projects. Stoppage of Chinese projects in Sri Lanka after the change of government was cited as an example of potential constraints that could emerge due to lack of trust and geopolitical influence of India and the US.<sup>99</sup>

Similarly, Chinese scholars remained even less sanguine about the success of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) given the high construction cost of the CPEC due to geographical constraints along with the political risk of regime instability and security risk of terrorism and separatism prevalent in Pakistan that could not be avoided. Regarding CPEC, it was argued that "the risks are still hard to evaluate and it is also very difficult to manipulate power. The idea is quite good but the reality is often very cruel."<sup>100</sup>

From an economic perspective, one Chinese scholar pointed out that from a long-term perspective, the prospects of economy and trade of China and the regions along the "Maritime Silk Road" were uncertain, notwithstanding great potential and space for cooperation between China and these regions/countries. Therefore, there was a need to consider "a more harmonious, environmentally friendly and sustainable way to invest long-term in the host countries and *solve the problems in China's foreign trade or even deeper problems in industrial restructuring*" (emphasis added).<sup>101</sup>

## **Rising India Reshaping Regional Geopolitics**

While India-China dynamics figures prominently in all the five volumes of the Annual Report, the sole focus area of the Annual Report (2016) was the geopolitical assessment of a rising India under Prime Minister Modi and its implications for China. This

early review of the Modi government by Chinese scholars notes progressive assertiveness in India's approach. According to the report, "India has taken a series of measures to revive the economy, made great efforts to leverage the geopolitical advantages, fully demonstrated its diplomatic charm, consolidated the relations with neighbouring countries, and deepened the relations with the USA, Russia, and Japan and other powers."<sup>102</sup> Further, India's goal of eastward expansion into the western Pacific beyond the traditional zone of the Indian Ocean became even clearer with the transformation of the 'Look East' policy into the 'Act East' policy.<sup>103</sup> In the Chinese view, India-China relations faced new challenges due to China's reluctance to include India in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) and the listing of Masood Azhar as a global terrorist along with India's views on non-participation in OBOR.<sup>104</sup>

It was highlighted that the US sped up the pace of engagement in the region in order to shape the geopolitical situation in her favour.<sup>105</sup> Continued warming of Indo-US relations was considered as the most 'dazzling part' of India's dynamic foreign relations approach, which has resulted in 'bustling' military cooperation between the two countries.<sup>106</sup> In the Chinese assessment, although the growing India-US bonhomie complicated China's geopolitical calculus, Indo-US relations is not an alliance and India will not become an alliance partner of the US, at least in the short term.<sup>107</sup>

Noting India's proactive approach in shaping the geopolitical contours of South Asia in 2015, the Chinese perceived that "India can exert a huge influence on the process of at least some South Asian countries' participation in the Belt and Road initiative, and may even reverse the trend in a period of time."<sup>108</sup> In addition, it was noted that India's competitive diplomacy could be leveraged by other South Asian countries as a bargaining tool in negotiation for specific OBOR projects. India's growing outreach to Africa was also noted in the similar context albeit with limited implications.

While India might not match China in terms of economic assistance, India's dominant or active position could be a potential concern for China's bilateral security relations in South Asia. It has been argued that "One of the key strategic complication for China

in Southeast Asia has emerged over the years due to a mind-set in some countries of relying on the US for security and China for the economy. If South Asian countries also develop a similar mind-set of relying on China for economic growth and relying on India for a security guarantee, it undoubtedly will cause an adverse effect on China's pushing forward of the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia."<sup>109</sup> The Annual Report (2016) highlighted broad consensus among Chinese scholars that "whether South Asia is considered as a core area for China's pushing forward of the Belt and Road initiative or not, India is always the most important factor that China should consider in formulating any policy regarding this area."<sup>110</sup>

### **The Centrality of South Asia and the IOR in OBOR**

While South Asia and the IOR were cited in the Annual Report (2014) as 'probable important region in future', in Annual Report (2017) the region was reported to have become central to 'China's expansion westward.' Even though the constraints of emerging geopolitical complications for China were noted in the earlier annual reports as well, the Annual Report (2017) highlighted that "in the future long to medium term, the strategic concerns of China gathered in South Asia will be bound to further increase [sic]."<sup>111</sup>

The key complications that had begun to impact China's engagement in the region and its progress of OBOR included the transformation of US-China dynamics from strategic competition to confrontation. This was due to the advent of Trump and India's increased comparative advantages in South Asia as a "regional core." In addition, Pakistan's position had become even more perilous after its strategic abandonment by the US. The broad pattern of strategic relations in South Asia in 2016 manifested "in the further rising US-Indian relation but the cooling US-Pakistan relation, and the declining Sino-Indian relation but steady Sino-Pakistan relation. [sic]" Russia's renewed strategic interest in the region and Japan's growing economic diplomacy with India and Bangladesh were also noted. The broad pattern of geopolitical interactions indicated a significant increase in 'the contents of confrontation games' (sic), or in other words, a progressive enhancement of strategic tension.<sup>112</sup>

Regarding OBOR projects in South Asia, the Annual Report (2014) examined the progress of projects in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. While significant progress in implementation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was highlighted, at the same time political uncertainty, perilous economic condition and security challenges of terrorism and separatism were noted as core risks.<sup>113</sup> Despite China often decrying terming its economic assistance as debt diplomacy, the report clearly noted that CPEC debt obligations would exacerbate Pakistan's macroeconomic situation and "the debt crisis may drag Pakistan into the economic crisis again."<sup>114</sup> However, the report argued that geopolitical risks need not be exaggerated since China-Pakistan relations have their own internal logic, and that China would need to factor and address these economic and political risks through a proactive approach. In addition it stated that a low-profile approach by China on security risks was recommended given the sensitivity of Pakistan in this regard.<sup>115</sup>

Notwithstanding Bangladesh's favourable perception of China, the report argues that geopolitical pressure from India, Japan and the US hindered the progress of China-Bangladesh bilateral relations. More importantly, Bangladesh is displaying enhanced sensitivity towards India's strategic concerns in sanctioning projects. Bangladesh's ambivalence on the Sonadia deep-sea project is cited as an example.<sup>116</sup> Similar pressures, competitive geopolitics along with political concerns about growing debt obligations due to structural imbalance in the economic relations were noted as key impediments in enhancing China-Sri Lanka relations.

In the Chinese perception, the influence of great powers on Sri Lanka seriously impacted the development of China-Sri Lanka's economic relations. India had significantly influenced Sri Lanka through development assistance and geo-strategic arrangement. In the Chinese view, Sri Lanka's dependence on India even surpassed its dependence on China. In addition, apprehensions about economic colonisation of Sri Lanka by China began to find traction in political and academic circles under the influence of overseas media and NGOs.<sup>117</sup>

The report also notes Myanmar's National League for Democracy's (NLD) go-slow attitude towards OBOR under Aung San Suu Kyi. While the official reason provided by Myanmar was its focus on national reconciliation, Chinese scholars argue that Myanmar remained suspicious and doubtful about OBOR.<sup>118</sup> According to them, Myanmar was simply overstating its geopolitical relevance and took a one-sided view on OBOR projects in order to garner better benefits from China. The report further highlights that given these political complications and related risks, China decided to bypass Myanmar for its Indian Ocean access by focussing on CPEC in the west and "by creating upgraded Mekong Sub-regional Cooperation-Lancang Mekong Cooperation mechanism in Southwest of Myanmar."<sup>119</sup>

Overall, the report argues that "though the CPEC is progressing very well, this flagship project has not yet produced a significant pulling effect on the entire South Asian region, nor has it had an obvious radiation effect on the surrounding area. South Asia remains a challenging region where this project is progressing relatively slow."<sup>120</sup>

India emerged as an 'elephant in the room' for China's South Asia policy, and India's lack of cooperation on OBOR along with its proactive diplomacy in the region began to be characterised as a key obstacle in progressing OBOR.<sup>121</sup> Competing regional connectivity initiatives by the US ('New Silk Road' and 'Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor') and India (International North-South Transport Corridor through Chabahar in Iran) were seen as strategic design to complicate China's regional outreach. In the Chinese assessment, geo-economic competition in the IOR was progressively becoming an extension of geopolitical games.<sup>122</sup>

### **Geopolitical Challenges of Indo-Pacific**

While the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical concept had been noted earlier in Annual Report (2014), by 2017, Chinese scholars were convinced that the Indo-Pacific had become a reality and was progressively being implemented through a concerted strategy against China.<sup>123</sup> The downward trajectory in US-China

relations had led to the assessment that the US is aiming to contain in the Indo-Pacific region through its Indo-Pacific strategy.<sup>124</sup>

As highlighted earlier, the Indo-Pacific construct was perceived as a strategic tool to contain China and it emerged as a critical constraint for China's westward advance. In addition, by combining the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific as an integrated strategic space, the Indo-Pacific framework seriously constrains Chinese activities in the South China Sea. According to China, Quadrilateral consultations between US, Japan, India and Australia, even though not a traditional military alliance framework, aim to counterbalance China comprehensively in the Indo-Pacific region. Along with growing criticism of OBOR as 'predatory economics,' parallel regional connectivity initiatives and alternate tools of regional credit mechanism have begun to take shape.<sup>125</sup>

Traditionally China has considered Western Pacific as its primary strategic direction and the Indian Ocean as a secondary strategic direction with a greater priority of immediate strategic challenges that lie in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. The Indo-Pacific construct has combined these two into a single strategic space which made strategic coordination between these two strategic directions a distinct possibility. If China takes tough action in the Western Pacific, resultant consequences may emerge in the Indian Ocean. Similarly, if India-China tension builds up in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, countervailing consequences by the US and others could transpire in the Western Pacific.<sup>126</sup>

The Annual Report (2018) highlighted that the Indo-Pacific construct has further enhanced the geopolitical salience of South Asia and the IOR along with greater prominence of India in the regional discourse. The Annual Report (2018) argued that South Asian geopolitics is significantly polarised due to the decline of India-China relations, strengthening of China-Pakistan relations, the rise of US-India relations and the decline of US-Pakistan relations. Under the growing influence of India, the progressive isolation of Pakistan by other South Asian countries has been noted as a serious concern.<sup>127</sup>

## China's Strategic Options and Countermeasures

During the five-year period (2013-18) covered by the five volumes of the annual report, South Asia and the IOR transformed from a 'probable important region in future' to a key region central to China's westward expansion in Asia. While for China the strategic importance of the region significantly increased, China's diplomatic and economic outreach in the region progressively became more constrained. Notwithstanding active diplomatic outreach and active promotion of China's goodwill through 'win-win' arguments for shaping a 'shared destiny,' China was not able to effectively negate prevalent narratives that portrayed China's economic policy as 'predatory' and its growing military power as a 'threat' to regional security order. This contributed towards the persistence of strategic mistrust and uncertainty about China's intentions.

As a counter to OBOR, alternative connectivity initiatives by the US and Japan seemed to have enhanced the bargaining leverage of countries in the region. The Quadrilateral construct under the Indo-Pacific strategy created additional strategic risks for China. In other words, while China had secured a foothold in the region, further expansion of its sphere of influence faced strong resistance. In the five volumes of the report, recommended policy pathways for coping with strategic challenges progressively evolved in response to the perceived vicissitudes in the geopolitical milieu.

As South Asia and the IOR was considered as a 'probable important region in future' in the Annual Report (2014), it recommended that "the policy of China for South Asia and Indian Ocean region shall be focused on the long-term development in order to patiently and realistically achieve the benefit maximization through gradually and hierarchically promoted policy and strategy."<sup>128</sup> The hierarchical strategy considered South Asia and Southeast Asia as 'near perimeter' and the wider IOR, that is, the African region and the Middle East were termed as the 'remote perimeter zones'. A strategic approach to South Asia included avoidance of escalation of differences with India and at the same time strengthening support to Pakistan in order to avoid unbalance of regional order in South Asia due to weakening of Pakistan.

In addition, China aimed to promote ‘small multilateral’ cooperation in the near perimeter zones along with the strengthening of cooperation with ‘preferred partners based on their friendly attitude towards China’ in the region. This differential cooperation framework aimed to develop potential Chinese partners in the region through exemplary benefits provided to preferred partners. In the remote perimeter zone, the preferred strategic approach was to “unleash the ability of the regional cooperation mechanism and expand non-exclusive influence via the market force.”<sup>129</sup>

Given the broader assessments about possibility of a *modus vivendi* with the US and the expectation of progressive normalisation of relations with India, as highlighted earlier, policy options of regional engagement emphasised the consolidation of China’s exclusive sphere of influence in South Asia and Southeast Asia while assuming a non-confrontational and cooperative approach within a multilateral framework in wider IOR.

The Annual Report (2015) focussed on searching for strategic pathways for the implementation of MSR. It noted that Chinese investments in Africa and Latin America even prior the OBOR initiative had earned the sobriquet of ‘neo-colonialism by China’ due to their focus on resources extraction. Similarly, port infrastructure projects were easily misinterpreted as a strategic or political intention of expansionist China. Misinterpretation about the “Belt and Road” initiative to some extent caused some countries’ to adopt a ‘wait and watch’ approach. Therefore, the report suggested that China must utilise its “diplomatic resources to publicise China’s values of cherishing harmony, moral concept, ‘a gentleman makes money in a decent way’ and concordance, and use the ‘value diplomacy’ as a glue for the MSR strategy (sic).”<sup>130</sup>

The report also advised that China must emphasise that OBOR is a collaborative endeavour in which China is simply a proposer and not a dominant partner. “All participating countries will be equal, and there will be no division of dominant and subordinate participants.”<sup>131</sup> In order to reduce mistrust and improve legitimacy, the co-option of regional institutions; increased participation of NGOs and academic institutions; an open and inclusive decision-

making process; transparent process for audit and evaluations were recommended.<sup>132</sup> To enhance trade flow through OBOR, it was suggested that trade facilitation procedures and legislative framework of partner countries should be progressively aligned to “establish a uniform international and trans-regional transportation coordination mechanism.”<sup>133</sup> The report also recommended an enhanced focus on completion of early harvest connectivity projects that were in various stage of implementation in order to demonstrate tangible benefits of OBOR.

While advocating an inclusive and egalitarian institutional architecture for OBOR, the report cautioned against the unbridled expansion of OBOR membership. There was an apprehension that the opening of OBOR membership to one and all could be exploited by some countries who may act as a proverbial ‘Trojan Horse’ in the envisaged institutional framework for OBOR to severely undermine the effectiveness of cooperation. Hence, it was recommended that the Maritime Silk Road should have two parallel institutions—a small group for ‘substantive work’ and an open platform for ‘low standard works.’<sup>134</sup> In essence, OBOR would have a hierarchical institutional framework in reality while maintaining a subterfuge of egalitarianism or in other words ‘a framework for inclusivity and transparency with Chinese characteristics.’

As highlighted earlier, the Indian Ocean progressively emerged as a key area for China’s growing energy requirement and trade flow. In addition, the strategic relevance of the Indian Ocean further increased since it is a centrepiece of MSR architecture. The Annual Report (2015) stated that “China’s hard power is far from enough to safeguard its important interests in the Indian Ocean and China is at a disadvantage in shaping regional order of the Indian Ocean region since any increase in military presence will be viewed with even greater suspicions.” Therefore, China should promote cooperative security strategies centred on the multilateral framework in order to promote stability and preserve its interests in the IOR. Under the OBOR framework, China should strengthen its strategic partnership with IOR countries at the bilateral, mini-lateral and multilateral basis in order to progressively evolve a security architecture in its favour.<sup>135</sup>

India-China relations under the Modi government was the sole focus of The Annual Report (2016); recommended policy options contained therein will be analysed in the next chapter. As discussed earlier, progressive constraints of geopolitical complexity in South Asia and the IOR had become conspicuous in the Annual Report (2017). It was also becoming clear that OBOR implementations were facing serious headwinds and the limitation of 'China's old model of foreign dealing' through government channels was becoming apparent. It argued that extremely low participation of private enterprise and non-governmental organisations in OBOR promotion hindered the translation of China's economic influence into international political influence. Therefore in order to "cultivate the willingness of relevant countries to conduct political cooperation," it would be necessary to strengthen interaction with academia and private enterprise rather than sole reliance on the governmental channel.<sup>136</sup>

Given the unstable security situation in the IOR, the assurance of security of economic and strategic interest had progressively emerged as an Achilles heel for China. While China had relied on security assurances of host nations in the past, it was progressively becoming clear that this approach would not be sufficient with its growing investments abroad. Therefore, the Annual Report (2017) argued that China needs to consider a 'go global' strategy for the deployment of its security forces by means of international cooperation in order to protect its investment, enterprise and citizens, including tourists.<sup>137</sup> It further argued that China should stress that the OBOR, apart from being a development and economic initiative, is also a strategic initiative in which security cooperation forms an important aspect. The report stated that "China should actively participate in the shaping of the security structure in South Asia in order to ensure the security of OBOR initiative in the region based on the security needs and the current situation in South Asia."<sup>138</sup>

The Annual Report (2018) focused even more sharply on strategic options for reshaping the regional order in order to cope with the Indo-Pacific construct. Notwithstanding the apparent challenges of a complex game of balance of powers, Chinese scholars also

pointed towards strategic opportunities for China in the Indo-Pacific construct. The report argues that China is a key stakeholder in a multilateral construct for addressing various security challenges in the region, namely, the nuclear issue in Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the Afghanistan situation, the crisis in Yemen and Syria along with non-traditional security challenges of terrorism and transnational crime. Therefore, China should push for greater 'institutionalisation of power through multilateral mechanisms' in order to provide legitimacy and recognition of China's 'Common Security' and 'Cooperative Security' concepts. Accordingly, "China shall consider rebuilding the security landscape for surrounding areas by combining the security order in both [the] India Ocean and the Pacific Ocean with the advance of the Belt and Road, and use the opportunities in the strategic turmoil in the Indian Ocean to ease the strategic pressure in the Western Pacific."<sup>139</sup>

In the Chinese perception, "the Indo-Pacific order, aimed to establish a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' through QUAD, is actually an exclusive system design against China." Therefore, China should prevent materialising of Quad as an institution through functional cooperation with Australia and India. In this regard, China should encourage the institutionalisation of the Indo-Pacific framework arrangement through the existing East Asia Summit under ASEAN. In the Chinese view, "the East Asia Summit is hosted by ASEAN and is not dominated by any major power which can guarantee the openness of the Indo-Pacific system and China will have full opportunities for participation in the mechanism."<sup>140</sup>

While many commentators outside China have argued that OBOR is not simply an economic initiative but has an inherent strategic design to reshape the regional order,<sup>141</sup> Chinese interlocutors refute these arguments as malicious propaganda.<sup>142</sup> As the above analysis has shown, there exists a strategic design nonetheless. It could be argued that these are independent views of a few academics and do not necessarily reflect the views of the government. However, it is pertinent to highlight that a majority of rationale and recommendations of the annual reports can be found in China's white paper on "Vision towards enhancing maritime cooperation

in building a peaceful and prosperous 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” published in June 2017. As recommended in the Annual Report (2017), MSR vision document posited security cooperation as a lynchpin in the MSR in order to redesign the existing security architecture in the oceanic arena of MSR. In July 2019, the Chinese defence minister officially announced that China is willing to deepen military exchanges and cooperation with the Caribbean countries and Pacific island countries under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>143</sup>

The regional geopolitics has been a critical factor in shaping India China relations. Among the geopolitical tensions that bedevilled the two countries during the 1950s, competition for strategic influence in the region along with China’s apprehension of encirclement through India’s strategic military alliance with the US and the Soviet Union had contributed greatly to the deterioration of bilateral ties. These factors have gained prominence again wherein China’s quest for expanding its presence and influence over the politics and security matrix of Asia and beyond has begun to encounter stiff geopolitical resistance in which India has begun to feature prominently. The following chapters examine these issues in greater detail.

## Notes

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56. Jiegen Zhang, "Maritime Silk Road and China's Indian Ocean Strategy: An Analysis from the Perspective of Cooperative Security," n. 54, p. 77.
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58. A geopolitical theories of 'Heartland' and 'Rimland' provides deterministic model which explains interactive dynamics between Land and Sea powers and explain the contemporary geopolitics with reference to history. Heartland theory was propounded by Halfred J Mackinder in his seminal book *Geographical Pivot of History* in 1904. The theory identifies landlocked northern part Eurasia as a heartland and pivot of geopolitics. Surrounding this pivot area is the marginal or inner crescent having both continental and oceanic attributes. Mackinder argued that heartland is the core area where economic and political forces will centralise and it will evolve as a superpower. The heartland has inaccessibility, natural fortification and enormous resources. Based on the similar premises, Rimland Theory of Nicholas Spykman is an antithesis to the heartland theory. As per Nicholas Spykman, 'the Rimland', an intermediate region between the heartland and the marginal seas had more geopolitical salience than Mackinder's landlocked heartland for the control of Eurasian continent since it contains most of the world's people as well as a large share of world's resources. He argued that the rimland as a vast buffer zone of conflict between sea power and land power which must function amphibiously to and defend itself against the land power of heartland and sea power of the offshore power. See also HJ Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal*, 23(4), 1904, at <https://doi.org/10.2307/1775498>, accessed on 25 June 2018; Nicholas J Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, Helen R Nicholl (ed.), Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1969.
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  63. Peng Liu, "The Security Structure in South Asia and Its Impacts on Belt and Road Initiative," in *Annual Report on the Development of the Indian Ocean Region (2017): The Belt and Road Initiative and South Asia*, Rong Wang and Cuiping Zhu (eds.), New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2018, pp. 169-71. [Note: Enunciated by President James Monroe in 1823, 'Monroe Doctrine' aimed to establish American Continent as exclusive sphere of influence of the United States. Declaring that the Old World and New World had different systems and must remain distinct spheres, Monroe made four basic points: the United States would not interfere in the internal affairs of or the wars between European powers; the United States recognised and would not interfere with existing colonies and dependencies in the Western Hemisphere; the Western Hemisphere was closed to future colonisation; and any attempt by a European power to oppress or control any nation in the Western Hemisphere would be viewed as a hostile act against the United States. Invoking the Monroe Doctrine analogy, Prime Minister Nehru has justified use of force for liberation of Goa from Portuguese in a speech in 1961 by stating that "*any attempt by a foreign power to interfere in any way with India is a thing which India cannot tolerate, and which, subject to her strength, she will oppose. That is the broad doctrine I lay down.*" Some commentators have posited that India has been attempting to enforce a version of the Monroe Doctrine in South Asia and Indian Ocean region and aims to make the region as its exclusive sphere of influence.]
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  67. Chuanlu Feng, "An Analysis on the Geopolitical Pattern and Regional Situation in South Asia," n. 55, p. 203.
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  69. Chuanlu Feng, "An Analysis on the Geopolitical Pattern and Regional Situation in South Asia," n. 55, p. 177.
  70. Ibid., pp. 190-4.
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  74. Hailin Ye, "The Strategic Landscape of South Asia and Indian Ocean Region", n. 64, p. 30.
  75. Ibid., p. 36.
  76. Chuanlu Feng, n. 55, p. 204.
  77. This inference is drawn from postponement of SAARC Summit in 2016 which was to be held in Islamabad. Taking a cue from India's non-participation in the summit due to cross border terrorism, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Afghanistan had conveyed their unwillingness for participation in the summit. Chuanlu Feng, "An Analysis on the Geopolitical Pattern and Regional Situation in South Asia," n. 55, p. 206.
  78. Chuanlu Feng, "New Trend in the Construction of "Indo-Pacific" and Its Impact on South Asia," n. 28, pp. 288, 298.

79. Chuanlu Feng, 'An Analysis on the Geopolitical Pattern and Regional Situation in South Asia', n. 55, p. 195.
80. Ibid., p. 196.
81. Ibid.
82. Hailin Ye, "The Strategic Landscape of South Asia and Indian Ocean Region," n. 64, p. 37.
83. Liu Peng, "Connotation and Dilemma of the US Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Responses", n. 15, p. 144.
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87. Hailin Ye, "The Strategic Landscape of South Asia and Indian Ocean Region," n. 64, p. 34. See also Chuanlu Feng, "An Analysis on the Geopolitical Pattern and Regional Situation in South Asia," n. 55, p. 201.
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92. Zhu, "The Strategic Game in Indo-Pacific Region and Its Impact on China's Security," n. 16, p. 28.
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111. Chuanlu Feng, "An Analysis on the Geopolitical Pattern and Regional Situation in South Asia," n. 55, p. 177
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## 4. Making Sense of Modi's India: Chinese Perceptions about India during the Xi Era

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There existed a broad expectation that Xi and Modi, both powerful leaders with strong domestic support, will be able to bring greater stability in the bilateral relations. Soon after the electoral victory of Prime Minister Modi in May 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping made a two-day visit to India in September 2014. The nature of bilateral ties between the two countries was described by Modi, in a new acronym, as moving from INCH (India-China) to MILES (Millennium of Exceptional Synergy). However, the efforts towards fostering personal bonhomie between the two leaders got stymied to some extent by the intrusion of Chinese troops into Indian Territory in Ladakh. Notwithstanding efforts to normalise the bilateral dynamics, strategic mistrust and resultant tensions in the India-China relations have progressively become more pronounced in the last seven years. India-China rivalry seemed to have entered a new phase with Xi Jinping's 'The Chinese dream' of making China a global leader<sup>1</sup> and Modi's desire to get India recognised as a great rising power and re-establish India's position as *Vishwaguru*<sup>2</sup> has begun to collide in different spheres at bilateral, regional and global levels.

This chapter explores the Chinese perceptions about India as highlighted in the five volumes of the Blue Book series. The chapter highlights that there has been significant calibration of Chinese perceptions towards the role and status of India and re-evaluation of the trajectory of bilateral dynamics in the last seven years. While there existed a recognition of competitive dynamics in the

bilateral relations, there also existed a sense of cautious optimism towards the future contours of India-China relations. China aimed to woo India away from the US and its allies towards the eventual acceptance of a Chinese-led regional order in Asia. However, China's disenchantment with India progressively grew with the strengthening of India-US engagement and India's active promotion of the Indo-Pacific framework for regional engagement. India's non-participation emerged as an Achilles's heel in implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The most visible manifestation of the strain on the bilateral ties has been the significant severity of the border standoff. Even though the countries have managed to off ramp the bilateral tension from the precipice of a potential conflict in the Doklam plateau in August 2017, the two subsequent informal summits remained unsuccessful in resetting ties to normalcy. Both countries again seemed to be on the brink of war in the Himalayan heights of Ladakh in a standoff since May 2020. After nearly ten months of tense brinkmanship, a process of coordinated and calibrated disengagement has begun to unfold. Notwithstanding easing of tension, the bilateral dynamics between India and China continues to be stymied by trust deficit.<sup>3</sup>

### **Overlapping of Strategic Sphere of Influence—the “Four C’s” Conundrum**

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Annual Report (2014) noted the geopolitical flux in the international order, both at the regional and global level; and one of the key factors in this regard had been rapid development in the economic and strategic profile of China and India. Similarly, it was argued that the swift emergence of the Indo-Pacific construct could be primarily attributed to the simultaneous rise of India and China, which contributed towards the shifting of the global political and economic centre from the Atlantic-Pacific region to the Indian Ocean-Pacific region.

Noting India's remarkable economic growth and concomitant increase in national power in the new millennium, it was stated that India has emerged as a predominant power in South Asia and that India has been striving to enhance the international influence

in order to realise its ‘dream of great power.’ In addition the report noted, “India is endowed with an extraordinary advantage by nature in the geopolitics, which is the best condition for India to be able to perform easily on the international diplomatic stage.”<sup>4</sup> Within this geopolitical context, India actively diversified its foreign policy in order to improve its international status through sustained engagements with major powers and regional actors. The report notes that while India’s regional outreach was driven by economic interests in the 1990s, strategic dimensions of India’s engagement had progressively begun to emerge. In the early years of the 21st century, India’s regional engagements transformed from the pursuit of economic interests to expansion of its strategic space and influence in South Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa. Accordingly, although the China-India relations progressively improved, mutual suspicions towards each other continued to exist.

The report notes that China and India, both being representatives of emerging market economies, have larger convergence of interests than divergences. There exists a significant potential for mutually beneficial cooperation in infrastructure, trade, investment and other areas. Greater cooperation between India and China will not only be of strategic significance for the development of both sides, but will also play a positive role in regional development and ‘the construction of the global order.’ At the same time, it was also pointed out that in both countries there were mainstream viewpoints that considered each other as a “long-term threat and competitor.”<sup>5</sup>

The report emphasised that China and India do not have an equal status in the international system, although “India has received more preferential treatments than China in terms of being accepted by the international society and participating in multilateral mechanisms.” However, China is far ahead of India in economic power and influence and has been a step ahead in achieving great power status. In addition, as a great power China’s responsibility and obligations in global geopolitics had changed and are way beyond developing countries like India, therefore its “attitude towards the international affairs and position” would not match with India’s at all times. The Annual Report (2014) observes that positional asymmetry between

India and China had substantially increased in last 10 years, which caused India to perceive China as a 'threat' and also increased suspicion that China tries to prevent India's rise. This 'unbalance' in bilateral dynamics explains India's "urgent willingness to compete with China in global affairs."<sup>6</sup>

In Chinese perception, India-China relations has been termed as "the most important and the most complicated bilateral relations" with the simultaneous existence of the **Four Cs**, that is, Conflict, Competition, Coordination and Cooperation at the bilateral, regional and global levels.<sup>7</sup> While the vexing issue of unresolved border dispute and Tibet remained at the core of conflictual impulse in the bilateral relations, it was further compounded by China's relations with Pakistan dynamics and India's aspirational demand of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) membership. Chinese scholars found evidence of strategic competition, which was evident in both countries' national security policies, and these, in turn, remained driven by mutual security dilemma and strategic mistrust. In addition, there existed competition between the two countries for resources and regional leadership in South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia and Africa.

The report observed that in the past two decades, bilateral relations between the two countries had matured with an increase in economic and trade exchanges, exchange visits of leadership and the signing of border agreements. Significant convergence of views had emerged regarding the need to maintain strategic stability in order to maintain their respective economic growth. There was also a common desire to shape international order to accommodate aspirations and concerns of emerging economies. Given these convergences, India and China had begun to coordinate their approaches in multilateral institutions, namely, WTO and Climate Change negotiations. Similarly, both cooperated to establish new multilateral institutions, namely, BRICS, AIIB, etc.

Given this strategic backdrop, the Annual Report (2014) observed that "while mutual interest and mutual dependence are on the rise, on the one hand, competition and divergences between the two countries are intensifying on the other hand."<sup>8</sup> Despite efforts

from both sides to enhance mutual understanding, political mutual trust and bilateral communication had not seen any fundamental transformation. In addition to the legacy issue of the boundary dispute, trade imbalance and geopolitical competition emerged as new factors in divergence of views between China and India.

Progressive ‘overlap of strategic space’ further compounded the complexity in the bilateral dynamics. It was around this period that India’s political and military cooperation with ASEAN and China’s neighbouring countries significantly increased under its ‘Look East’ policy. At the same time, China began diverting more attention to South Asia and the Indian Ocean region (IOR) in order to seek a breakthrough in its ‘Go West’ approach.<sup>9</sup> Both, India’s ‘Look East’ strategy and the extended influence of China on South Asia brought certain pressure and influence on each other’s traditional sphere of strategic interest. As a result, the Indian Ocean emerged as a key intersection zone of Indian and Chinese strategic interest.

The report argued that as India’s ‘Look East’ policy’s aim was to counterbalance China’s influence in Asia. India’s enhanced engagement in Southeast Asia and East Asia was an attempt to put ‘soft restrictions’ on China. India’s growing military cooperation with Vietnam and oil exploration in the disputed area in the South China Sea were cited as examples. Perception about India’s strategic design to contain China were further enforced by media reports that highlighted the growing demand from the Asia-Pacific region for India to assume the role of a regional balancer due to concerns from rising China.<sup>10</sup>

While terming India’s ‘Look East’ policy as a containment tool against China, Chinese scholars repetitively emphasised that China’s outreach to South Asia is primarily economic and its growing presence in the Indian Ocean aims to ensure the protection of her vital energy Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). It was argued that “for China, the sea areas in between from the Korean Peninsula to India are the most important geopolitical environment, which determines success or failure of the rise of China. Therefore, nothing is more precious to China than India as a friend in the neighbourhood.”<sup>11</sup> At the same time, scholars also pointed out that

India considers South Asia and the Indian Ocean as its exclusive sphere of influence as 'concentric circles' (Mandala) theory of diplomacy and, therefore, remains apprehensive about China's growing influence in the region.<sup>12</sup> The report observed that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Circle (BCIM)—which are "two small multilateral cooperation strategies"—had been unreasonably hyped as evidence of China's expanding influence in South Asia. India remained wary of China's all-weather partnership with Pakistan even though Pakistan no longer enjoyed 'strategic equipollence' with India. Similarly, India suspected that China's investment in maritime infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka is strategic in nature.<sup>13</sup>

The Annual Report (2014) stated that China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean was an important part of China's maritime strategy and was essentially "a fait accompli from a purely geographical sense."<sup>14</sup> The Indian Ocean contains China's major trade routes and is, in essence, China's vital economic and energy lifeline. While China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean grew in order to ensure protection of its own legitimate interests, this presence emerged as a key friction point in the India-China relations since India traditionally views the Indian Ocean as 'India's Ocean' and its core national interest. As a result, India not only focussed on enhancing its naval power but also strengthened its defence cooperation with the US and Japan, along with deepening cooperation with other countries in the region through the regional mechanism in order to check, balance and contain China.

In the Indian Ocean, China's remained concerned about the security of its trade and energy routes in addition to the potential vulnerability of its seaborne trade through blockades at key choke points, namely, the Strait of Malacca, Andaman Seas and the Strait of Hormuz. At the same time, India's main concern consisted of the expanding influence of China and other countries in its strategic neighbourhood along with India's potential strategic encirclement by 'the so-called string of pearls' of China. The report also argued that China's participation in the maritime infrastructure in the IOR, (viz., Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Tanzania) for

economic reasons, was misperceived by Indian scholars as China's strategic design to constrain India and was unnecessarily hyped by the Indian media as 'string of pearls'.<sup>15</sup> Although China had been displaying a cautious and cooperative attitude, India remained unconvinced. Given these factors, it was observed that strategic competition between India and China was likely to intensify further in the future in the IOR. At the same time, the report also highlighted that the competitive dynamics between China and India in the Indian Ocean "are not so much a 'strategic', as 'uncertainty' and 'concern'." These uncertainties and concerns alone were not enough to constitute conflict and confrontation between China and India.<sup>16</sup>

The report noted the growing strategic and military cooperation between the US and India. It stated that in addition to seeing China as a threat, the US was more concerned about a stronger relationship between India and China, the two emerging regional powers, which could 'accelerate the declination' of its hegemonic influence in the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. The US considered India as an important strategic partner due to her rising strength and favourable geographical location in its 'Asia-Pacific rebalancing' and 'Indo-Pacific' strategy to balance the Chinese influence in the region. The US has aimed "to achieve the purpose of balancing China by 'prying + using' India [sic]." It was argued that notwithstanding significant progress in military cooperation and trade relations, there existed substantial friction between the US and India. Despite the US' efforts to encourage India for greater leadership in the regional affairs, the Chinese scholars felt that "India remains unwilling to be used as a pawn by the United States to contain China in the Indian Ocean region."<sup>17</sup>

The Annual Report (2014) highlighted that the India-China border dispute was an issue left over by history and both sides had made some progress in reconciliation through negotiation. However, the periodical occurrence of small-scale border conflict indicated that "the differences and contradictions of the two countries in their historical tradition and realistic development path are quite deep." Notwithstanding the efforts from both sides to ensure tranquillity on the Line of Actual Control (LAC), small scale border incidents

could seriously undermine diplomatic efforts of building political trust as was evident during a rather prolonged border standoff in the Aksai Chin area in April 2013.<sup>18</sup> According to Chinese scholars the occasional standoff at the disputed boundary often got exaggerated due to media hype and the resultant domestic pressure made the Indian position inflexible.<sup>19</sup> It further argued that the border dispute was not the fundamental problem in the relationship between China and India, but “the ultimate expression of deepened prejudices and contradictions in the conflict of realistic interests.” If these prejudices and contradictions could not be really understood and eased, the border problem will continue to exist.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, it was also highlighted that the China-India boundary dispute “is not in the same category as China’s dispute with Japan on Diaoyu Island.” The current disputes and differences could be solved by political ways and mutual understanding and accommodation.<sup>21</sup> In the Chinese view, the border dispute remained a key uncertainty in India-China relations, which could be influenced by geopolitical trends. Regardless of the ‘Agreement on Border Defence Cooperation’ signed in October 2013, the possibility of similar events in the future continued to exist, which could impact the positive progress of bilateral relations.<sup>22</sup>

Remarkable growth in bilateral trade was highlighted as one of the most visible manifestations of improvement in India-China relations. In Chinese perceptions, India-China economic relations remained the most critical factor to maintain stable bilateral relations despite the continuing overhang of negative factors of territorial disputes and other strategic divergences. However, this optimism had begun to fade somewhat as new problems emerged with the growing asymmetry in the bilateral economic relations, India’s growing trade deficit and increased trade disputes. Chinese scholars disagreed with India’s contention about trade imbalance due to restrictive market access of Indian products, namely, IT, pharma and other products where India has an advantage. The growing trade imbalance was attributed to structural factors in the Indian economy and India’s inability to pursue significant economic reforms. It was argued that the low volume of Indian exports to

China was due to price competitiveness, quality and cognition of Indian products in the Chinese market. India's export restrictions on raw materials export to China was cited as one of the main reasons for the ballooning trade deficit. Artificial obstacles due to 'security reasons' and adverse public opinion were cited as inhibiting factors for direct investment by Chinese companies in India. In sum, Chinese scholars were of the opinion that the trade imbalance was unlikely to be resolved in the short term. In addition, there was also an argument that the 'political overtone' in Indian discourse on trade imbalance with China had a potential negative consequence on bilateral relations.<sup>23</sup>

From the Chinese perspective, India-China relations in 2013 reflected the existence of a 'Four Cs' conundrum, highlighted earlier, with considerable ups and downs. Notwithstanding growing diplomatic engagements and convergence of interests and views between the two countries, there was no significant progress towards building political mutual trust and communication. Even though both China and India were perceived as being more pragmatic and tolerant in accepting each other's existence and involvement in their "traditional backyard" and "sphere of influence," there was clear recognition of lingering mutual suspicions towards each other.<sup>24</sup> It was highlighted that the competition for strategic interests between the two was progressively becoming fiercer with the increasing geopolitical relevance of the Indian Ocean. "In addition to the boundary problems left over by history, the trade deficit, wrestling for new geopolitical interests, competition for the controlling rights over the regional cooperation have also gradually become important factors that affect India-China bilateral relations."<sup>25</sup>

The Annual Report (2014) noted that India's general election in 2014 would become a key variable of India-China relations. Even though the report was written before the election result, Chinese scholars had noted the growing popularity of BJP and its prime ministerial candidate Modi, who had begun to criticise the UPA government for being soft on China. The report surmised that "China will most likely be the hyped factor in the election, and more comments and ideas which advocate being tough to China

will also appear.”<sup>26</sup> At the same time, it argued that irrespective of the election campaign rhetoric, the finally elected power would maintain a pragmatic approach towards India-China relations for practical considerations while there could be some turbulence in the short term.

The report highlighted that the simultaneous rise of two neighbouring countries of large size like China and India was ‘unprecedented’ and had the potential to influence bilateral dynamics as well as the international political system. Therefore, the key to the future contours of India-China relations lay in the recognition of this ‘unprecedented’ situation by both countries along with the evolution of appropriate pathways for shaping the bilateral relations accordingly. Since both countries had a mutual interest in maintaining their respective growth profile, there was a need to move away from the zero-sum game mentality and work towards reducing the trust deficit. Overall, the Annual Report (2014) portrayed a sense of cautious optimism towards the future contours of India-China relations. However, this sense of cautious optimism significantly changed in the later reports.

### **Staring into the Dragon’s Eye—India’s Assertive Foreign Policy**

In the Chinese perspective, India-China dynamics in 2014 were defined by an ‘assertive government’ in India helmed by Prime Minister Modi along with the emergence of South Asia and the Indian Ocean as a key region for the implementation of China’s One Belt One Road (OBOR) strategy, particularly the 21st Maritime Silk Road. While the key focus of the Annual Report (2015) was to explain the broader ramifications of OBOR in redefining China’s external engagement, it focussed sharply on highlighting the implications of India’s assertive foreign policy on India-China relations in general, and on OBOR in particular.

The Annual Report (2015) noted significant economic dynamism in India along with a proactive approach in its diplomacy. In 2014, India surpassed China in the economic growth rate to become the fastest growing economy in the world. On the diplomatic front,

India began to roll out its 'neighbourhood first' policy in South Asia to reassert its regional dominance and also began to constrain China's outreach in South Asia. With the change of government in Sri Lanka, India had reclaimed its pre-eminence as the most important strategic partner while China's ongoing projects, namely, Colombo city projects had stalled. In Southeast Asia, India's outreach had significantly grown and had enhanced its position and influence in the regional geopolitics.

India's international profile had also significantly grown with the progressive strengthening of its relationship with the US, Japan, Australia and Europe. Even though not at the same scale as OBOR, India's 'Project Mausam' was considered as competing connectivity initiative. The report noted that "since Modi took office one year ago, the Indian government has been more assertive and proactive in foreign policies, apparently with a stronger desire to compete with China and to seek a world great power status."<sup>27</sup> The report observed that while China's strive for great power encountered stiff resistance from the 'leading power (US) and its affiliates', India enjoyed a rather favourable strategic environment.

Using a retrospective analytical framework, Chinese scholars saw Modi's assertive diplomacy more of a continuity than a change. In their view, "assertive diplomacy has been a tradition of India" and one of the core goals of "Indian diplomacy has been to seek acknowledgement of global great power status" since the 1990s. At the same time, the report characterised Modi's foreign policy assertiveness as something rare since such an approach by India had not been observed for decades.<sup>28</sup> Chinese scholars argued that Modi's strong style of government was evident during his rule as the chief minister of Gujarat and his assertiveness has roots in the prevalent optimism about India's future rise, stable majority in the parliament, and the nationalist policy of the BJP, which, incidentally, also made India a nuclear power. In their assessment, Modi's strong style of governance formed the basis of this assertive diplomacy.

The report noted a remarkable improvement in India's self-confidence about development prospects. It argued that while this prevalent dynamism in the policy framework may not "generate a

significant rise in the overall strength and international competitiveness of India immediately,” it stimulated India’s economic performance to a certain extent and more or less enhanced India’s international status at least in a short term. At the same time, the report highlighted significant uncertainty about India’s growth miracle in the long term given the structural impediments of governance style, bureaucratic bottlenecks and prevalent social contradictions. It contended that “although Modi’s strong performance is very eye-catching, its sustainability and actual effect are still questionable.”<sup>29</sup>

In Chinese assessment, the Indian mindset about India-China dynamics had undergone significant change due to India’s newfound confidence bolstered by optimistic nationalist sentiment, the prospect of robust economic growth and the favourable strategic environment. Notwithstanding the huge gap between India and China, India thought it could handle India-China relations on its terms since China was perceived to be at a relative geopolitical disadvantage. China’s relations with the US and Western countries were strained. In addition to significant tension in China-Japan relations, there existed disaffection among some Southeast countries towards China. Under the given geopolitical situation, India believed that China would attach greater importance to India-China relations and seek stability in the bilateral relations. Therefore, China would be amenable to accept India’s propositions on bilateral terms of engagement. In addition, there was also a perception in India that there was an opportunity to make historic strategic decisions in the bilateral relations with strong and decisive governments in both countries. In view of the above perceptions, Chinese scholars argued that the “Modi-led Indian government” was likely to hold a “more active and assertive position than that of the Congress Party-led government towards China on territorial disputes, OBOR and other issues in the India-China ties.”<sup>30</sup>

Regarding territorial dispute, Chinese scholar assessed that India would be eager to push for a ‘package solution’ on the boundary dispute without making any substantial concession. It was highlighted again that India had a tendency to hype up border confrontation through disclosure to media about transgressions during major visits

of Chinese dignitary to India. In the Chinese view, these were ‘tricks’ to keep the border dispute as a focal point in India-China relations, which was played up during Premier Li Keqiang’s visit to India in May 2013 and was again witnessed during President Xi Jinping’s visit to India in September 2014. Also, Modi’s visit to Arunachal Pradesh in February 2015 prior to his visit to China in May 2015 was seen as a strong political motive towards making the boundary issue central to the bilateral relations.<sup>31</sup>

Chinese scholars viewed India’s assertive approach as an attempt to compel China for early resolution of the border issue through an ‘East-West Swap’ as a pre-condition for negotiation. It was stated that “India expects China to give up its claim over the Southern Tibet in the control of India, which is most of Arunachal Pradesh. Then both China and India can make negotiation on the disputed western territory, Tawang and other disputed small areas.”<sup>32</sup> In Chinese perception, India was eager for an early breakthrough on the border issue since the huge gap in the national power between China and India was likely to become even wider more in future. In addition, India also perceived that “with the improvement of China’s Tibetan infrastructure network, some instability factors may also emerge in Arunachal Pradesh.”<sup>33</sup> However, it was contended that notwithstanding any eagerness for early resolution, India was unlikely to propose any solution and it expected China to initiate the East-West swap proposal. In Chinese assessment, even if China considered renouncing its claim on the Southern Tibet for settlement it was unlikely to fetch any significant concession from India given the nationalist approach of the BJP.

The Annual Report (2015) highlighted that India’s role and status in OBOR in general and MSR, in particular, had been a ‘hot topic’ for discussion in Chinese academic and policy circles. Given its huge market size and, even more important, its strategic location, India was considered as ‘more important than any other countries to China’ for realising the envisaged potential of OBOR. At the same time, India’s approach towards OBOR was characterised as a key strategic risk in the implementation of OBOR since this would have bearing on decisions of other countries in the IOR in general

and South Asia in particular regarding their participation in OBOR projects. Without endorsement from India, it would be difficult for China to remove latent misgivings in the region on OBOR being a strategic design of China for regional dominance.<sup>34</sup> In 2014, in the broad assessment of Chinese scholars, India's approach towards OBOR was considered as ambivalent and the report argued that "India will neither raise explicit oppositions nor actively participate" in OBOR even though it noted India's grave suspicions about China's growing economic and strategic influence in the region.<sup>35</sup>

In scoping the Chinese approach towards shaping India's perceptions on OBOR, the report highlighted two strands of prevalent views within Chinese academic circles. The mainstream view was that China must make attempts to encourage India's participation in OBOR. In this regard, one Chinese scholar argued that in 2015 the situation in "the India-China relation is as it is like sailing against the current, so we must prevent India from misinterpreting or misunderstanding the MSR strategy and avoid the aggravation of the trust deficit between China and India caused by misunderstanding, so that India will not react to the competitive pressure brought by China's MSR strategy through the destructive approach of strengthening its diplomatic relations with the countries in South Asian Sub-continent."<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, some Chinese scholars opined that India had a deep-rooted ambition to dominate the IOR and did not see any substantial benefits through its participation in OBOR. Given the competitive dynamics in the India-China relations, India would not like to see OBOR succeed. India's hedging and balancing approach towards China in the region was already evident in the transformation of its 'Look East' policy to 'Act East' policy in Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia, its 'neighbourhood first' approach in South Asia along with the rolling out of a competing connectivity initiative through 'Project Mausam.' India perceived that there was no great benefit likely to accrue by participation in OBOR. As an emerging great power and as an attractive investment destination, India had other avenues of capital and technology infusion for its infrastructure. India's non-participation in OBOR would not be a

barrier for attracting even Chinese investment. Therefore, the report noted that “Driven by such a mind-set, India will only wait for good opportunities to deal with ‘Belt and Road’ issues, make frequent requests to China, and link the participation in ‘Belt and Road’ with China-India border issues, in an attempt to utilize China’s urgent promotion of ‘Belt and Road’ to compel China to make major concessions on other issues.”<sup>37</sup>

As a coping measure, Chinese scholars recommended prudence in responding to India’s ‘assertive diplomacy.’ In the Chinese view, India lacked commensurate national strength to match its self-proclaimed international commitments and had limited capacity to translate its foreign policy goals into concrete actions. Chinese scholars held rather pessimistic views of India’s future growth prospects in the long term and argued that China’s strategic approach towards India not be determined by India’s assertive diplomacy based on its ‘stunning performance’ in the short term. Instead, China must factor India’s diplomatic potential in the long term as well as the structural factors that determine its direction.

Regarding the border issue, the Annual Report (2015) argued that India-China border issues were too complex to be resolved in a hurry. Therefore, China should not give impression that it desires to expedite the resolution of the border dispute. “China should firmly emphasize the complexity of the border issues and then moderately express the willingness to promote cooperation with India in solving the issues. On the territorial issues, China should categorically deny the existence of the so-called ‘East-Exchange for-West’ plan,” which in any case had never been formally proposed by China. Instead, China must emphasise sector wise discussions on the border issue and should avoid package deals of any sort. In addition, “China should also strengthen its military and economic activities in the disputed border areas and adequately fight back the infringement of India on the zone under the actual control of China.” Additionally, even the smallest move on the border by India should not be taken lightly since Chinese forbearance on such issues could encourage India towards a more aggressive posture in the future. Curiously, the report argued that frequent border confrontations may not do

much harm in maintaining broader stability in the India-China relations.<sup>38</sup>

From the Indian perspective, it was crucial to note that notwithstanding Article VII of India-China agreement on the boundary question regarding safeguarding interests of the settled population,<sup>39</sup> Chinese Scholars considered that 'Tawang' or any other settled areas along the border could still be negotiated. Similarly, there existed an expectation that a secessionist voice could emerge in Arunachal Pradesh which would push for its merger with Tibet given the better infrastructure and economic opportunities on the Chinese side of the border. Both these scenarios had potentially very serious consequences for India.

On the Belt and Road issue, the report recommended that China should remain practical and pragmatic in seeking Indian participation in OBOR. It highlighted that there were simply three options for India. First, India could stay out of it by neither endorsing nor opposing. The second option for India was active participation and the third option was active opposition. In case India decides to stay away it would not be a great loss for China. The report further argued that while the second option was a rational choice given its economic benefits and positive impact on India-China relations, India was unlikely to choose this option for geopolitical reasons. Regarding third options, it was observed that even if India turned obstructionist, it would have limited practical impact for India did not have the economic and diplomatic wherewithal to provide an alternative cooperation framework. If India chose to invite extra-regional powers for this purpose, it would only strengthen the Chinese position in the region.<sup>40</sup>

The report acknowledged that India's participation in OBOR would certainly be useful. However, "China should also stick to its stance of separating its efforts towards India's participation in OBOR" from other issues in bilateral relations, including resolution of the border dispute. It was argued that "if because of its worry about India's obstruction, China slows down the participation of other countries in the construction projects or even stubbornly regards the Indian involvement as a precondition, then the 'Belt and

Road’ will surely end in failure and there will be no hope for the ‘Belt and Road’ to be proved by time.” Also, “if the ‘Belt and Road’ has a firm foothold in the Indian Ocean region, it’s just a matter of time for India to participate; if not, it will make no sense whether India participates in it or not.”<sup>41</sup> In the Chinese view, Indian intransigence on OBOR was unlikely to dissuade its neighbouring countries from cooperating with China on infrastructure development.<sup>42</sup>

Even though India’s concerns on OBOR was duly noted, the Annual Report (2015) remained optimistic about India’s future participation in OBOR. India’s assertive diplomacy and its ambivalence on OBOR were conflated with India’s perceived desire for early resolution of the boundary dispute. The report argued that China must resist the temptation for such compromise and should posit that a favourable stance on OBOR would be a reflection of India’s goodwill and positive attitude towards improvement in the bilateral relations.

In sum, the Chinese assessment of India-China relations in 2014 indicated a progressive downturn in the bilateral relations and its future looked uncertain with growing strategic competition between the two countries.

### **Looking through the Glass Darkly—Deciphering Modi’s India**

While all five annual reports devoted more than 50 per cent of their analytical efforts to evaluate the evolving contours of India-China relations, the Annual Report (2016) focussed solely on deciphering the nature and characteristics of Modi’s India and its implications for bilateral dynamics. In the Chinese perception, India-China dynamics seemed to have significantly transformed due to India’s newfound assertiveness with the advent of Modi’s government in 2014.

In the two-year period of Modi’s government reviewed in the report, India was perceived to have “accelerated its economic growth, leveraged its geopolitical advantages, fully demonstrated its diplomatic charm, consolidated the relations with neighbouring countries, and deepened the relations with the USA, Russia, and Japan and other powers.” The report argued that under the

leadership of Modi, India was moving towards its long-cherished goal of becoming a 'global leader.'<sup>43</sup> The report observed that Modi's characteristic style of result-oriented governance had injected a new vitality in India, which, in turn, had resulted in reshaping India's international image and reviving its domestic economy. In addition to becoming the fastest-growing economy on the globe, India's great power development strategy had begun to include new features, which had a certain impact on India-China relations.<sup>44</sup>

In contrast to the favourable strategic environment of India as evinced by the growing recognition of its great power status, China faced enhanced strategic constraints due to progressive deterioration in the US-China relations. Further, in addition to the existing structural constraints in the India-China relations—namely, the border dispute, trade imbalances, China's relations with Pakistan and prevalence of 'China threat' theory in India—these relations became further complicated with an overlap of strategic space of the two countries and the resultant strategic dilemma. In the Chinese perception, India-China geopolitical contradictions became relatively more prominent with India's opposition to OBOR and Chinese opposition to India's membership to Nuclear Supplier Group and the UN sanction on Masood Azhar.<sup>45</sup>

Within this broad geopolitical context, the Annual Report (2016) analysed changes in India's approach towards China during Modi's government in order to explore possible pathways for furthering India-China cooperation. In line with the assessment of the previous year, in the Annual Report (2015) it was argued that the foreign policy approach of 'Modi-led 'aggressive' government' was a broad continuum of 'great power strategic thinking' of India since its independence and reflected the great power ambitions envisioned by Nehru. In the Chinese view, what had changed was the fact that Modi had reinvigorated India's foreign policy approach in a pragmatic and proactive manner to shape a favourable geopolitical environment for the achievement of its great power ambition.<sup>46</sup>

In the Chinese view, a combination of its favourable geography, historical traditions and political reality drove India's great power aspiration, which had been "widely accepted as a geopolitical

concept and strategic goal by the majority of the political elites and ordinary people.”<sup>47</sup> With the emergence of the Indian Ocean as a strategic highway of the global economy in the 21st century, South Asia had naturally become ‘the centre of the geopolitical game for the world powers’ and India’s geopolitical appeal for major powers had significantly enhanced given its dominance over South Asia in terms of geographical size, economic scale and resources.<sup>48</sup> India’s geopolitical strategy aimed “to consolidate India’s unique dominance in the South Asian subcontinent” and progressively expand its influence in order “to achieve the core strategic goal of controlling the Indian Ocean and the long-term strategic goal of extending its presence into the Pacific.” In addition, India did not want its strategic space being dominated by ‘India’s enemy or hostile ideology’.<sup>49</sup> It was argued that while growing national power had given India some confidence in pursuing its great power strategy, India had not been able to surmount its ingrained geographical insecurity originating from broader strategic instability in South Asia, ongoing imbroglio in Afghanistan, troubled relations with Pakistan and deep suspicion towards China.

In the Chinese assessment, India’s approach towards China was shaped by the general notion that perceived ‘China as a strong geopolitical force’ and ‘a big threat to India’s security.’ This “geopolitical concept of regarding China as a ‘threat’ and competitor has been gradually transformed into a ‘headstrong cognition,’ which is habitually used to guide the thinking of Indian strategists and political elites.”<sup>50</sup> While the geopolitical issue had always remained a ‘subjective consideration,’ the ‘objective stimulus’ of China’s rise had further strengthened Indian perceptions of considering China as a strategic competitor even when China could be the most promising partner for India’s economic growth.<sup>51</sup>

The Annual Report (2016) argued that Modi’s foreign policy ‘approach reflects aggressive and psychological expectations of achieving the great power ambitions’ through its dominance on South Asia and further expansion of its strategic space in the Asia Pacific.<sup>52</sup> However, India was not able to overcome its ingrained sense of geographical insecurity and lacked confidence. The report identified five key approaches in India’s foreign policy strategy.

- First, Modi's frequent emphasis on re-establishing India's position as '*Vishwaguru*' (world leader). This highlights India's relentless pursuit for a great power status. Even though a dominant country in South Asia, India overestimates its capability in describing itself as a competitor of China.
- Second, the phrase 'Neighbours First' being the top priority of India's foreign policy and a tool to constrain China's growing influence in South Asia. In the Chinese view, Modi seems to recognise that India's ability to reconfigure the geopolitical unity of the South Asian subcontinent in its favour will enhance India's geopolitical leverage in dealing with the US, China and other great-powers. Vibrant regional outreach through the 'neighbourhood first' policy has demonstrated India's "ability to promote regional integration by bringing together the governments and the people in the region."<sup>53</sup>
- Third, India's two-phased 'Look East' policy as an approach for expanding India's strategic influence in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. According to Chinese scholars, this 'Act East' policy serves India's great power strategic goal. Enhancement of economic and trade ties with Southeast and East Asia in the first phase was followed by the deepening of political and security ties in Southeast Asia in the second phase. In the Chinese view, the transformation of 'Look East' to 'Act East' policy by the Modi government has sharply accelerated India's economic, strategic and political engagement in the region. It is observed that "India is expanding its strategic space in the Asian-Pacific region and playing a bigger role in the region" with an aim to contain of China's regional influence in Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean region.<sup>54</sup>
- Fourth, Modi attaching great importance to developing relations with great powers, and US-India relations remaining a top priority. In the Chinese assessment, India has emerged as a favourite partner for great powers and this favourable situation is likely to continue. Modi's diplomatic charm has capitalised this geopolitical advantage and has consolidated India's relations with the US, Russia and Japan. The remarkable strengthening of Indo-

US strategic partnership has been most eye-catching and reflects mutual need for strategic cooperation. The US needs India to maintain its global hegemony while India needs the US to maintain its hegemony in South Asia. In the Chinese view, counterbalancing China's rising influence is a major strategic convergence between India and the US. It is argued that "the United States endeavours to balance China's influence by strengthening the strategic cooperation with India, the strongest country in South Asian. This has not only exacerbated the strategic competition and friction between China and the United States but also has cast a shadow on the improvement of the Sino-Indian ties."<sup>55</sup>

- Finally, the Modi government's diplomatic approach towards China reflecting a 'prudent' and 'defensive' mindset. In the Chinese view, India's mainstream cognition of China as a threat to India's security interests and great power ambitions has remained valid during Modi's regime. In addition to pre-existing challenges in the bilateral relations—namely, the border dispute, trade imbalance, China-Pakistan relations and the Indian Ocean—the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has touched India's sensitive nerve and has become a serious issue in the bilateral relationship. India also remains suspicious about "Chinese investments in infrastructure construction of other South Asian countries under the framework of MSR." Under the influence of its traditional geopolitical thinking, India views OBOR not as regional economic cooperation but a geopolitical design to reshape the region order that challenges India's influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. According to Chinese scholars, Modi's government seems to have formulated its strategic approach to balance China's influence by prioritising its geo-strategic interests over its geo-economic interests. The resultant enhancement of strategic competition might lead to significant deterioration in India-China relations and bilateral dynamics may 'go astray'.<sup>56</sup>

In its assessment of the impact of Modi's foreign policy, the Annual Report (2016) argued that India's proactive diplomacy was

extremely impressive in South Asia.<sup>57</sup> While South Asia had emerged as a key region for China for implementation of its OBOR strategy, India's determination to preserve its strategic dominance in South Asia had intensified. India had managed to establish dominance in South Asia and had constrained freedom of action of external powers, including China. At the same time, it was noted that while India's strategic objectives mainly focussed on checking and balancing and even obstructing China's participation in matters in the South Asia subcontinent, India needed to be very careful to avoid 'public and direct collision with China.'<sup>58</sup> In addition, India lacked the economic resources to meet the developmental demands of its neighbours and would not be able to prevent them from seeking such cooperation from others, including China. This would provide China with some leeway in pursuing economic cooperation in South Asia notwithstanding India's objection towards OBOR.

There was a broad consensus among Chinese scholars that "whether South Asia is considered as a core area for China's pushing forward of the Belt and Road initiative or not, India is always the most important factor that China should consider in formulating any policy regarding this area." It was argued that India was the 'elephant in the room' in South Asia's geopolitical landscape with overwhelming strategic advantage and 'confidence in being bold to use force.'<sup>59</sup> Given the core objective of OBOR being the creation of an open economic structure in China's periphery, it would be a huge setback if India with nearly 80 per cent share of South Asian economy remained out of this framework. In addition, many countries in South Asia were dominated by pro-India parties, that is, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and the 'Neighbourhood First' policy adopted by the Modi administration was likely to exert an even bigger influence on these countries' policies.<sup>60</sup>

In the Chinese view, there were two facets of India's position on OBOR: one was India's own approach towards OBOR and the other was the impact of India's policy on other South Asian countries. While India's cooperation on OBOR would be helpful, excessive emphasis in this regard would encourage India to seek excessive concession from China in the bargain. It was recommended that

“China’s efforts to get India to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative must be practical and realistic; especially, China should not consider India’s willingness or reluctance of participation as a criterion by which to measure the success or failure of the Belt and Road strategy.”<sup>61</sup> China should emphasise economic aspects of OBOR in seeking cooperation from India and must avoid such an support being conditional to geopolitical and territorial concessions.

Chinese scholars remained cognisant of the implications of India’s obstructionist approach towards OBOR, which could not only influence some South Asian countries’ decision to participate in OBOR but could even potentially roll back or delay ongoing projects, as was seen in the case of Sri Lanka Colombo city project. In addition, India’s approach could even provide greater leverage for South Asian countries to bargain for better terms from China. The report argued that China should avoid intensifying competitive struggle with India in South Asia over OBOR. It was important that China realised that its main pursuit in South Asia was not providing public goods or establishing a security order but getting long term economic return. Therefore, China should scale down propaganda about its “so-called strategic pursuit in security and emphasise the economic nature” of OBOR projects. The report argued that China did not need to slow down its pace of participating in the development of South Asia to gain an understanding of India. While India could delay a few projects at a relatively small price, it did not have resources to make up the resultant loss in capital and technology. Therefore, China needs to maintain strategic patience and must unwaveringly stick to the ‘bottom-line thinking’ in reversing setbacks as and when it occurs without incurring a heavy cost. Moreover, the report noted that “the strategic pivotal point of China’s security strategy in South Asia is Pakistan, and Pakistan’s foreign policy regarding China is unlikely to be greatly influenced by India.”<sup>62</sup>

There existed a realisation among Chinese scholars that it would be rather impossible for India to support OBOR due to its territorial sensitivity as the CPEC passes through India’s claimed territory in

Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. In addition, India believes that China actually supports Pakistan in the Kashmir dispute. The CPEC projects under OBOR further solidified this perception. Lack of mutual trust between India and China was another major hindrance.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the report noted growing coordination between the two countries on bilateral economic cooperation and regional economic development—during Xi Jinping's visit to India in 2014 and Modi's visit to China in 2015—and practical cooperation in the implementation of the BCIM economic corridor. In the Chinese view, India, in any case already had a 'foot in the door' for participation in OBOR through its membership of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and BRICS Bank. Therefore, the report argued that notwithstanding India's stated objection on OBOR, China must continue "to strive to get India to participate in the initiative."<sup>63</sup>

The report went to great lengths to highlight the great cooperation potential between the two countries, given the mutual need for cooperation and strategic convergence on the emerging multipolar world and growing economic complementarity. It argued that China would be the most suitable development partner for capital and technology need within India, which would help in accelerating its economic growth. Given these imperatives, both countries must enhance their communication at all levels, namely, government, business and strategic community—in order to reduce mistrust and enhance practical cooperation.<sup>64</sup>

However, this normative emphasis on strengthening bilateral cooperation was caveated with a not so optimistic prognosis of future contours of bilateral dynamics. Using a medical metaphor, Chinese scholars stated that "India is 'allergic' to the 'China threat' and lacks an 'antibody,' making India hold one-sided views of China, with a certain degree of 'dislocation.'"<sup>65</sup> The key challenge in furthering India-China relations was this defensive mind-set of India, "which not only regards the rise of China as the biggest threat to the rise of India, but also deems China's cooperation with South Asia and the Indian Ocean Rim countries as a great challenge to India's influence there."<sup>66</sup> It was argued that notwithstanding visible self-assurance in

India's foreign policy, the persistent worry about the 'China threat' was a reflection of India's lack of internal confidence.

The report argued that Delhi's aspirational strategic objective of becoming global power remained conditional to India's recognition as a great power in Asia. Therefore, India needed to evaluate what makes it stronger, a 'positive-sum game' of cooperation with China or a 'negative-sum game' of balancing and containing China. "While the negative consequences of strategic rivalry between the two countries under the 'security dilemma' is hard to predict, the mutual benefits from the bilateral cooperation are clearly evident." Whether India liked it not, China's presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean was a 'fait accompli.' Therefore the Chinese scholars reported that "India must accept the reality of China's economic strength and potential benefit it offers to India." If Delhi chooses to capitalise its geopolitical prominence in cooperating with Beijing on OBOR, India would be the biggest beneficiary of Chinese cooperation in comparison to any other countries in South Asia. In light of the above arguments, the report highlighted that "India needs more self-confidence and open-mindedness in promoting the Sino-Indian strategic cooperation."<sup>67</sup>

The above summary of the Chinese assessment of India-China dynamics clearly indicated growing discomfiture with India's assertive diplomacy in general and India's discontent on OBOR in particular. In the Chinese assessment, India's opposition to OBOR had turned into an Achilles' heel in the implementation of OBOR strategy. While progressive intensification of strategic competition was noted earlier, the assessment in this volume of the annual report had begun to indicate the likelihood of bilateral relations 'going astray.' In sharp contrast to the previous volume, the analytical tenor about India had become sharp and truculent. It would become even sharper in the next volume.

### **Indian Discontent on OBOR—China's Achilles' heel**

As highlighted in Chapter 2, complexity in China's geopolitical environment had significantly enhanced in 2016. With the advent of Trump, the US approach towards China became

confrontationist. In addition, South Asia and the IOR, which in the Annual Report (2014) were characterised as a region of peripheral interest to China, emerged as a 'core region' for the implementation of MSR and a springboard of Chinese westward expansion.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, India's comparative advantage had further enhanced in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. India's opposition to OBOR emerged as an Achilles' heel for China. The Annual Report (2017) analysed these geopolitical developments and assessed potential implications for India-China dynamics. In addition, the series editor Cuiping Zhu in a separate book *India's Ocean: Can India and China coexist in the Indian Ocean* focussed on the maritime dimension of the bilateral dynamics. Even during the third year of the Modi government, deciphering geopolitical calculus of the Modi government and its implications for the future contour of India-China relations remained the key focus area in both publications.

In the Chinese assessment, the broad contours of a regional geopolitical trend in 2016 indicated "further rising in the US-Indian relation but the cooling of the US-Pakistan relation, and the declining Sino-Indian relation but steady Sino-Pakistan relation."<sup>69</sup> In the regional power structure, India's dominance in South Asia became even more prominent. Delhi's discomfiture with the Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean became more accentuated. India began to actively shape geopolitical order in the Indian Ocean through its declared strategic policy of being the 'net security provider' in the region.<sup>70</sup> Due to 'mistaken cognition of China's intentions', India's military and security cooperation with other major powers such as the US, Japan, Australia, etc. enhanced considerably.<sup>71</sup>

Given the growing strategic importance of maritime strategic space for commercial interests and political influence, Cuiping Zhu argued that competitive dynamics between India and China would "play out less on land than in a naval realm."<sup>72</sup> From the Chinese perspective, China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean was a result of the strategic necessity to protect its sea lanes against hostile powers and was not an effort to encircle or contain India. However, India was increasingly worried about the growth of

China's presence in its strategic backyard. India perceived "China's effort to strengthen cooperation with countries along the Indian Ocean as China's attempts to contain rising India through so-called 'String of Pearls' strategy." As a countermeasure, India seemed to be using a combination of its economic power and naval power for enhancement of strategic influence in the region in order "to make breakthroughs in the sea so as to help solve its problems on the land (with China)."<sup>73</sup> The mutual suspicions about the strategic intention of each other were considered as the main source of strategic rivalry and potential conflicts between the two countries. It was argued that unless carefully managed, India-China rivalry in the sea would further intensify.<sup>74</sup>

From the Chinese perspective, at the core of India's geopolitical thought was deep-rooted strategic awareness of an Indian version of the 'Monroe Doctrine.' Delhi considered South Asia as 'South Asia of India' and the Indian Ocean as 'India's Ocean' and aimed to exclude other big powers from the region.<sup>75</sup> Chinese scholars found significant analogical similarities in India's approach in the Indian Ocean with the three-phased evolution of the US foreign policy in implementation of the original Monroe Doctrine:

- In 1823, when American President James Monroe declared that any attempt to occupy the newly independent countries in Latin America by European powers would be considered as a threat to the US peace and security, the US did not have the capability to prevent European powers on its own. Great Britain, the dominant country of that time, had a common interest with the US in this regard and they aligned their interests to exclude other European powers from America. In the Chinese view, "India's policy regarding the Indian Ocean region is similar to the Monroe Doctrine at that time. While India suggest that other big powers should not control, in reality the US is maintaining peace and SLOCs security in the Indian Ocean, and preventing other big powers' expansion into the Indian Ocean[sic]."<sup>76</sup> Like the US was free-riding Great Britain in the 1800s, India is free-riding the US power to establish its dominance in the Indian Ocean.

- As the US economic and military power grew, there was no requirement for the US to seek support from Great Britain. From 1890, President Cleveland implemented Monroe Doctrine 2.0 to establish the US' dominance in Latin America through its own power. The Annual Report (2017) correlated this with India's extant strategic approach in the Indian Ocean and argued that "India has implemented the Cleveland version of Monroe Doctrine in South Asia and has established its dominance in the subcontinent. Even if other big powers in the world may not agree, India also has the intention and capability to implement its decision in the subcontinent."<sup>77</sup>
- In the President Theodore Roosevelt version of the Monroe Doctrine, the US prevented intervention from big European powers in the Caribbean during the bankruptcy of the Dominican Republic in 1904. While assuring its protection of British interest in Latin America, the US facilitated Britain to withdraw its navy from the American continent to deal with Germany, which was emerging a challenger in Europe. During this third phase of the Monroe Doctrine, the US established its dominance in the Western Hemisphere. In the Chinese assessment, India harbours similar ambitions.

The report argued that "The important goal of India's Indian Ocean strategy is to construct credible capability to respond to the threats and challenges from China and prevent foreign regional powers from intervening in the Indian Ocean regional affairs, thus ultimately achieving the Indian strategic objectives of a great power in South Asia and a power in the 'Indo-Pacific' region."<sup>78</sup> If India's Monroe Doctrine in South Asia and the Indian Ocean gets upgraded to Theodore Roosevelt's version of Monroe Doctrine, China's OBOR initiative could face significant jeopardy as India would be in a position to exclude China and others from the region.<sup>79</sup>

At the same time, it was observed that the biggest challenge for India in its pursuit of strategic dominance in the Indian Ocean was the overwhelming presence of the US, not China. "It is not India's desire to allow the Indian Ocean to remain under the US's control

forever, and it accepts the status quo only because it doesn't have the capability to change it."<sup>80</sup> Whether India would be willing to cooperate with China to weaken the US stronghold in the India Ocean was highlighted as a key uncertainty in the India-China dynamics.

Cuiping Zhu argued that while India remained dissatisfied with the current geopolitical order in the Indian Ocean, it objected to Chinese naval presence due to apprehension of losing its leverage. "This is one of the reasons why India shows a relatively positive approach towards economic cooperation with China but presents to be passive in strategic cooperation."<sup>81</sup> It was argued that notwithstanding this faint possibility of India-China consensus on the Indian Ocean, China must prevent this eventuality of the Indian version of Roosevelt 'Monroeism' from becoming a reality.<sup>82</sup>

Based on analyses of India's regional engagement in the three years of the Modi government, the report argued that 'there is more continuity than variability' in the Indian geopolitical calculus and approach towards China. However, "the biggest change is to constantly adjust diplomatic means for the established strategic objectives, create and exploit opportunities and flexibly carry out the pragmatic diplomacy so as to create a favourable strategic environment for the rise of great power."<sup>83</sup>

The Annual Report (2017) highlighted two views in China about Modi's attitude towards India-China relations. On one hand, there was an expectation that Modi would follow a pragmatic policy towards China and would strengthen bilateral economic ties given his focus on the economic revival of India. On the other hand, it was observed that given his 'strong man' image and the headstrong cognition of 'China threat' in India, it would be difficult for Modi to choose cooperation with China in the great power diplomatic policy.

The Annual Report (2017) argued that rather than choosing between the binary option of being pragmatic and conciliatory or tough and conflictual, Modi's foreign policy combined key elements of both, which was evident in his 'issue diplomacy' (issue by issue diplomacy) with China. The Indian government had deconstructed the China-India relations into many specific issues. China's response

regarding these issues was used as a criterion by India to measure China's approach towards India and define the nature of India-China relations. While the convention of China's diplomacy emphasised a holistic trend in the bilateral relations, Indian foreign policy stressed on the specific problems that existed between the two countries. China saw following developments in 2016 as the manifestation of 'issue diplomacy' by India:<sup>84</sup>

- India expressed strong discontent with China's repeated shelving of the listing of Maulana Masood Azhar, founder and leader of the Pakistani extremist organisation Jaish-e-Mohammad suspected in the Pathankot airbase attack on January 2016, in the UN Security Council Sanction List 1267. While China stressed that the issue being bilateral in nature should be discussed between India and Pakistan, India saw this as China's unbalanced foreign policy and its preference for Pakistan. In response, the Indian government toughened its approach towards China. In addition, there was call for boycott of Chinese products by the Indian public.
- China's lack of support for India's NSG membership became another point of friction. In June 2016, India applied to join in the NSG with support from the US and other western countries. India attempted to pressurise China by publicising the support from the US, Russia and other countries. However, China refused to endorse India's membership since India had not met the key qualification criteria of being a Nuclear Proliferation Treaty signatory.
- In September 2016, India accused Pakistan of staging an attack on a military camp in Kashmir and enforced diplomatic blockade by influencing other South Asian countries to boycott the annual SAARC summit in Pakistan. The India-China relations were impacted by the spill-over effect of India-Pakistan divergences. In addition to openly expressing its opposition on CPEC citing a violation of its sovereignty, India also denounced China by terming its support to Pakistan as an abetment to terrorism. This stance was not only vociferously raised in media but also in Track I and Track II discussions.

It was highlighted that Modi government's foreign policy regarding China got tougher and India clearly set favourable responses on the above issues as a precondition for maintaining the basic stability of the China-India relations. The Dalai Lama's high-profile visit to South Tibet (Arunachal Pradesh) in 2017 was seen by Beijing as a retaliation to China's lack of favourable response on issues raised by India. In the Chinese view, similar issues will continue to bedevil India-China relations in the future as well. The Annual Report (2017) observed that India's 'issue diplomacy' has the following 'Four No' characteristics:<sup>85</sup>

- **No Consideration for Bilateral Relations.** India's foreign policy doesn't give much consideration to the basic conditions of the bilateral relations between China and India, and India often tries to pressurise China by making progress on bilateral relations conditional to China's response on the issue raised.
- **No Concern for Retaliatory Response.** India remains unconcerned about the resultant retaliatory response from China on its aggressive attitude and continues to use 'oppressive diplomatic language' on China.
- **No Consideration for Reciprocity.** India pays scant regard to reciprocity in its bilateral relations with China. While it seeks assurances and support from China on issues but in its diplomatic approach does not take into account China's sensitivity on certain issues.
- **No Escalation but Continued Tension.** Even though China has not given a positive response on the issues raised by India, it has avoided actions to escalate divergences between the two countries. Similarly, while India has also not taken escalatory action but it has always 'new issues' to conduct a diplomatic offensive against China.

It was argued that India's assertive diplomacy of the above 'Four No' approach was based on a clear-eyed assessment of potential implications. Notwithstanding China's superiority in the comprehensive national power, Delhi had factored that South Asia in general and India in particular are not the main thrust of Chinese

diplomatic and military strategy. In addition, given the growing complexity in the US-China relations, China was not in a position to mobilise all its resources “to overwhelm India through all-out confrontation unless it is absolutely necessary or there is no other way.” Therefore, “China’s determination and will to invest resources in its dealing with India is weaker than India. In addition, the international and regional environment for India is more favourable than that for China.”<sup>86</sup> India has a strong partnership with major powers internationally and is a dominant country in the region at the same time. India is sure that its assertive approach towards China will get support or at least acquiescence of the major powers, while China’s countermeasures towards India would be perceived as hegemonic behaviour.

In such a context, India had assumed that its assertive diplomacy with China had no additional cost since China was constrained in its response through countermeasures; at worst, China may not give India a positive response. Further, India’s newfound assertiveness towards China originates from the growing optimism about its future development prospects. While India had raised similar demands to China in the past, it preferred to maintain the bilateral relationship. However, with growing confidence about India’s growth potential, Modi was showing greater willingness to constantly push the boundaries of many sensitive issues in the bilateral relationship.

In the Chinese assessment, Modi’s proactive and assertive approach in pursuing ‘issue by issue diplomacy’ with China had “failed to achieve the purpose of getting India to enjoy overall equal diplomacy with China, and it failed to get actual benefits for India on specific issues either.”<sup>87</sup> China had taken cognisance of India’s efforts to fundamentally change longstanding bilateral consensus and the extant contours of bilateral dynamics. Therefore, China no longer trusted ‘Modi’s diplomatic idea’ and was increasingly reluctant to seek accommodation with India on contentious issues, leading to greater divergences between the two countries. In the Chinese view, the negative impacts of the divergences—about the nature of the diplomatic approach and diplomatic strategy of each other—would be far bigger on the bilateral relationship than on the dispute over

specific issues. China and India's different views on OBOR were cited as a typical example of this approach "in which such a guess about the intention of each other has a bigger influence on each party's decision making than evaluation of the effect."<sup>88</sup>

In view of India's clear indication about its non-participation in OBOR, The Annual Report (2017) surmised that while India's negative approach on OBOR might not have had a direct significant impact, India's ability to create significant obstacles in OBOR implementation could no longer be neglected. In addition to hindering China's engagement in South Asia, India could also intensify strategic competition in the IOR through increased military and security cooperation with the US. The OBOR strategy also faced increased geopolitical complexity due to India's deepening economic cooperation with Japan, Iran and other countries.<sup>89</sup>

In the Chinese view, the India's negative approach towards OBOR was a reflection of its serious discontent with China which originates "not only from the negative influence caused by India's recognition of China as a strategic competitor and the trust deficit due to the cognitive errors about OBOR," but also due to prevalent distrust in political relations.<sup>90</sup> In addition, OBOR offered no great economic incentive for India. Given its growing economy and a huge market, India continues to remain an attractive investment and trade destination. Therefore, even Chinese trade and investment would continue to flow into India irrespective of its position on OBOR.<sup>91</sup>

According to the report, India's opposition to OBOR was an expression of broader discontent with China, its objection over CPEC was just "one part of its strategy for dealing with China." Strategic objectives inherent in India's opposition to OBOR were intended to compel China to make bigger concessions to India in order to secure its participation; force China to delink CPEC from OBOR in order to further squeeze Pakistan; and to seek acquiescence from China about India's engagement in the Chinese periphery.<sup>92</sup>

Within this context, whether China should attempt accommodation with India to break the impasse between the two countries over OBOR or if such an approach was even necessary remained a key conundrum for China. There were two kinds of views

on this issue. One argument posited that notwithstanding its zero-sum approach on OBOR, India had not been able to create significant impediments in the progress of OBOR projects even in Nepal, which is considered to be within India's security periphery. While OBOR projects in South Asia had certainly experienced some setbacks, to attribute all these problems to India's obstructionist approach was a significant overestimation of India's strength. Instead, China should examine structural issues in the specific projects and resolve these issues bilaterally with the country concerned in a mutually beneficial manner.<sup>93</sup> Other views argued that although it was certain that India's support for OBOR would not be forthcoming in the foreseeable future, China must not ignore the negative implications arising from India's perception of considering China as a strategic competitor. Therefore, it would be necessary to manage divergences and avoid deterioration of India-China relations for the smooth progress of the "OBOR" in South Asia and the IOR.<sup>94</sup>

It was argued that India's reluctance towards OBOR is essentially a problem which originates from the inherent complexity and uncertainty in India-China relations. Therefore, China should improve strategic communications in order to alleviate India's 'cognitive errors' towards 'China's strategic motives and resultant apprehension.' At the same time, it was also observed that India had been largely unresponsive towards positive gestures from China towards fostering mutual understanding. While China had pitched for synchronisation of India's 'Act East' policy and China's 'Go West' strategy for win-win cooperation, there was an apparent lack of actions and initiative from India to strengthen cooperation. Unarguably, there was a mutual distrust between India and China, but India's distrust toward China was higher mainly because it considered China as the biggest threat to India's security.<sup>95</sup>

The report uses an old Zen proverb regarding future pathways for improving India-China relations that is, "it's better for the doer to undo what he has done" (解铃还需系铃人), which essentially means whoever has caused the problem should resolve the issue. From the Chinese perspective, India was not reciprocating China's positive attitude towards enhancing cooperation, instead, Delhi was

creating obstacles through its ‘issue by issue’ diplomacy. Therefore, it was time for India to take a call on the kind of relationship it wants with China. Rather than pursuing the path of constructive cooperation, “if India continues to put its limited energy and power in weakening the strength of China and coping with China’s rise, then it will only harm the long-term interests of India and delay the achievement of its cherished goal of becoming a great power.”<sup>96</sup> Chinese scholars also argued that China did not need to make an explicit concession to India for seeking its participation in OBOR, rather China should allow India to evaluate the nature and role of the initiative through a long period of observation.

### **Implications of the Indo-Pacific Construct**

As highlighted in Chapter 2, the Indo-Pacific construct was the main focus area of the Annual Report (2018) and was perceived as a geopolitical design to contain China. As India was identified as a major actor in the Indo-Pacific construct, the report explored the implications of this geopolitical construct on the India-China dynamics in great details. In addition, the report also focussed on the key regional developments in 2017, including the Doklam standoff.

In the Chinese perception, the Indo-Pacific construct was no longer an issue of conceptual deliberation but had become a geopolitical reality in 2017. The key indicators towards progressive implementation of the Indo-Pacific construct included articulation of the Indo-Pacific strategy in US Strategy documents; India’s active promotion of ‘Act East’ policy; strengthening of strategic cooperation between US-India and Japan-India; re-launch of Quad consultations between US, Japan, India and Australia; and increasing hedging and rent-seeking behaviour among small and medium countries. Essentially, the Asia-Pacific region and the IOR had become a unitary strategic space and the central stage of global geopolitics. While the Indo-Pacific construct enhanced India’s geopolitical profile, it posed a significant challenge to China.<sup>97</sup>

In the context of India-China dynamics, the key trends in 2017 highlighted in the report included enhanced strategic relevance of South Asia and the IOR within the Indo-Pacific construct, the

strengthening of Indo-US strategic cooperation, progressive isolation of Pakistan in South Asia and at the same time the strengthening of Sino-Pakistan relations. The report noted that India with a growing strategic profile had become even more dominant in South Asia and the IOR.<sup>98</sup> At the same time, India-China relations were increasingly strained due to India's assertive diplomacy and tougher diplomatic stance towards China. India first boycotted China's Belt and Road Forum and then confronted China at Doklam. Even though the standoff got peacefully resolved it left a deep scar on bilateral relations.<sup>99</sup>

In the Chinese assessment, India had emerged as the biggest beneficiary of the Indo-Pacific construct. There was discernible rise in India's strategic profile as a key regional balancer due to enhanced strategic and military cooperation with the US and Japan. There was also wide-ranging support for India's growing involvement in the regional forums. The Indo-Pacific construct had allowed India to further expand its influence from the Indian Ocean, which is in line with India's strategic aspiration to become a great power.<sup>100</sup> India's cooperation with the US, Japan, Australia and other Southeast Asian countries had significantly enhanced India's strategic leverage against China to balance China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean and constrain implementation of MSR.<sup>101</sup>

In sharp contrast to India, the Indo-Pacific construct had enhanced strategic complexity in the Chinese geopolitical milieu. As mentioned earlier, Chinese scholars averred that the Indo-Pacific initiative's aim was to "contain China in a relatively comprehensive way."<sup>102</sup> The US-China relations had continued to deteriorate and the US through its Indo-Pacific strategy aimed to isolate China in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>103</sup> Traditionally China has considered the Western Pacific as its primary strategic direction and the Indian Ocean as a secondary strategic direction. By combining the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific as an integrated strategic space, the Indo-Pacific construct had not only complicated China's strategic approach towards ensuring its peripheral security in its immediate maritime periphery but had also created significant impediments in the construction of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in South

Asia and Southeast Asia. For China, a potential threat of coordinated containment efforts from two directions (Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean) had begun to emerge as a key strategic challenge.<sup>104</sup>

In Chinese perceptions, growing coordination between the US, Japan, India and Australia through Quad emerged as a significant strategic challenge. For a long time, the US-Japan alliance was the primary strategic direction of China and the main source of the security dilemma. India was the second direction in the rise of China and posed little threat to China if bilateral relations remained stable. However, India's growing strategic cooperation with other major powers within the Indo-Pacific construct had added complexity in China's strategic calculus. Regarding this Quad-induced strategic dilemma in the India-China dynamics, the Annual Report (2018) argued that

China will have to be more concerned about the regional and even international effects of the strategies towards India, for which could lead to the situation of 'holding back from taking action against one party for fear of injuring other parties.' On the one hand, if China takes a tough strategy against India, it may be countered by the US in the primary strategic direction; on the other hand, if China tries to stabilize Sino-India relations to avoid putting too much effort into the secondary strategic direction, for this will reduce the ability and raise the difficulty of China to cope with the primary strategic direction, it may on the contrary make India believe that the current situation is favourable for it to strengthen the strategic and tactical blackmail against China by relying on the four-party (QUAD) mechanism and repeatedly attempt brinkmanship, as a result, China will not only find it difficult to balance the primary and secondary strategic directions, but may also fall into the dilemma of ineffective means in the secondary strategic direction.<sup>105</sup>

The report argued that India had clearly understood this strategic constraint on China. India's active participation in the Indo-Pacific strategy and increased strategic coordination with Quad members was aimed to enhance its strategic leverage "to balance the growing

influence of China in the Indian Ocean and restrict the extension of MSR to the Indian Ocean.”<sup>106</sup> In the Chinese view, “India’s hype on the border issue has become a *jetton* (betting chip) for the game with China and the strategic cost paid by India has been small up to now.” India’s assertiveness towards China and ratcheting of border tension reflected a “bottom-line thinking that even with increased tension, the situation will not go out of control.”<sup>107</sup>

Chinese scholars argued that “India is deeply aware that China’s rise requires a peaceful and stable external environment,” which constrains China from initiating stern countermeasures. This understanding allowed India to employ a range of calibrated provocative measures against China which include continued support to the Dalai Lama and Tibetan separatists, small border incidents and an overall aggressive stance towards China. India’s aggressive and assertive stance against China increased its strategic profile; won the approbation of “international anti-China forces”; and also enhanced domestic support for the Modi government. Against these payoffs, the only downside of these low-cost provocations were strained relations with China, which is not a major concern if resultant tensions remain within the manageable threshold.<sup>108</sup> In the Chinese view, India’s stance during the Doklam incident was shaped by the above strategic assessments and India could continue to employ similar approach even in future.<sup>109</sup>

The Annual Report (2018) contended that the then current complexities in India-China relations had four unique characteristics. First, strategic interactions between the two countries had become truly multidimensional and were being simultaneously conducted in both continental and maritime arenas at bilateral, regional and global levels. Second, power asymmetry in India-China was compounded by “asymmetric mutual cognition and asymmetric mutual demand” or, in other words, differing strategic perceptions and irreconcilable expectations. Third, India-China relations characterised the simultaneous existence of “confrontational games, strategic competition, compromise coordination, and reserved cooperation.” Fourth, “the process of bilateral interaction between China and India on different issues may bring several different interactive results.”<sup>110</sup>

It was argued that there existed significant common interests along with serious divergences in the India-China relations. On one hand, the convergences on issues of common interests provided opportunities for strengthening cooperation and ‘win-win’ outcomes. On the other, divergences on certain issues contributed towards strategic competition with a ‘zero-sum’ outcome. The extant status quo in India-China dynamics remained in between a ‘win-win’ and ‘zero-sum’ outcome since existing “state of power and interest distribution neither satisfies the two parties nor makes them very depressed.” However, with vicious interaction between China and India for shaping ‘state of power and interest distribution’ to their respective expectation level, a possible situation of ‘lose-lose’ through overt conflict becomes apparent.

In the Chinese view, the peaceful resolution of the Doklam incident had illustrated ‘a certain tacit understanding’ between the two countries to avoid ‘lose-lose’ scenarios. At the same time, the report highlighted that in China this peaceful disengagement had not quietened down the domestic discourse on this issue. Some of the angry sentiments on the issue had not only vented contemptuous feeling on India but also contained “either overt or covert allegory of China’s weakness.” Chinese scholars argued that such an emotional response is unhelpful as it stimulates domestic nationalism in India, which already contains strong anti-Chinese sentiments and would have potentially negative effects on the future development of India-China relations.<sup>111</sup>

It was pointed that the future contours of India-China relations would crucially depend on the nature of interaction on two ‘hot issues,’ that is, the ‘boundary issue’ and ‘OBOR’ in the short term, and both need careful contemplation.<sup>112</sup>

- In the Chinese perspective, the comprehensive resolution of the border dispute was not the most urgent issue since the border dispute was not a fundamental factor determining the development of India-China relations. Further, the border issue was not a bilateral issue any longer but a reflection of the broader structural contradiction among the major powers. Progress on the border issue seemed unlikely in the short term

and its resolution would have to wait till the emergence of a new realignment and regrouping among the major powers through necessary structural changes in the international system. In other words, China will be unwilling to engage with India for the resolution of the border dispute till the geopolitical alignment has turned in its favour.

- The report noted that India and the border issue was “complicatedly intertwined with other issues, such as national sentiment, domestic interest groups, military enterprises, and military status.” It was possible that India could manipulate the border issue in a controllable manner to provoke China in a timely and appropriate manner even in future. The report argued that China needed to calmly examine the lessons from the Doklam incident, particularly what had prevented further escalation. Since India considers border dispute escalation as a low-cost option, the key challenge was to make it clear to India that the boundary issue is easy to use but hard to control. It was argued that a “careful analysis of the inherent development of the *sea power logic* will be slightly helpful in judging the future direction of China-India relations.” *While the report does not provide any further explanation of this ‘sea power logic, it could be inferred that China could be exploring sea power options in future India-China standoffs.*
- Despite the ups and downs in the bilateral relations and India’s lack of support on OBOR thus far, Chinese scholars posited India as a potential partner rather than a competitor and still remained hopeful of India’s support for OBOR. At the same time, it was argued that the appeal for win-win cooperation of China was unlikely to eliminate India’s old geopolitical thinking that projects China as its biggest threat. While India remained willing to play the role of counterbalancing China in the international community to enhance its strategic profile while China remained significantly constrained in employing stern countermeasures against India. Therefore, the report argued that India may continue to oppose OBOR even in the future.

The report observed that China and India, the two largest Asian countries, had the potential to transform Asia from a geo-economic and geopolitical perspective to create a ‘harmonious Asia.’ However, this optimistic scenario will only be realised “if India can recognize the historical trend, cast aside old geopolitical thinking, and accept international concepts like ‘harmonious world,’ ‘Asian common security’ from China, as well as participate in global governance with China, and jointly shape the new international political and economic order.”<sup>113</sup> At the same, it was highlighted that it was unnecessary for China to be apprehensive of India’s participation in the ‘Indo-Pacific construct’ or to try to win over India’s support on OBOR, as it would provide India even greater motivation to seek further concessions from China.

### **Pathway From Doklam to Galwan—Multitude of Crises as New Normal**

Even though two countries managed to step back from the brink after a rather tense 73-day long eyeball-to-eyeball military standoff in 2017 at Doklam, India-China relations remained significantly strained. In order to smoothen this wrinkle in the bilateral relations, an informal summit between Modi and Xi was held at Wuhan, China in April 2018. This informal summit, beyond media’s glare and without any predefined agenda, was an effort to strengthen strategic communication and mutual trust through direct, free and candid exchange of views between two leaders.

During the informal summit, both countries reached a consensus that “stable and balanced relations between India and China will be a positive factor for stability amidst current global uncertainties.”<sup>114</sup> Both leaders also emphasised on managing the differences and not allowing differences on any issue to become disputes. In order to avoid future military standoff, both leaders issued strategic guidance to their respective militaries to strengthen communication in order to build trust and mutual understanding and enhance predictability and effectiveness in the management of border affairs.

While the broad contours of bilateral dynamics between India and China post the Wuhan summit progressed towards normalisation,

a new wrinkle emerged in August 2019 with India's revocation of special status granted to the state of Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution and administrative division of the state in two union territories, that is, Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir. In view of the unresolved boundary dispute with China in the Ladakh region, the Government of India specifically clarified that this change had not altered India's external boundaries or its territorial claims in any way. Notwithstanding this clarification, China termed India's move to scrap Kashmir's special status 'not acceptable' and argued that 'unilateral change of India's domestic law has hurt Chinese sovereignty.'<sup>115</sup> China also tried to raise this issue in the United Nation Security Council, which was not successful.<sup>116</sup> There was also an incident of a scuffle between Indian and Chinese troops at Pangong Tso lake, Ladakh in September 2019.<sup>117</sup> These incidents provided a rather ominous shadow on the second informal summit between India and China, which was scheduled in October 2019 in Mamallapuram, India.<sup>118</sup>

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the second informal summit between Modi and Xi reiterated the consensus reached during the first informal summit in Wuhan. The leaders were of the view that the positive direction of ties had opened up possibilities for taking bilateral relations to greater heights through trade, economic and people-to-people ties. Both sides also agreed to progress the special representative dialogue to arrive at a mutually agreed framework for mutually acceptable settlement of boundary issues based on the political parameters and guiding principles that were agreed by the two sides in 2005.<sup>119</sup> The summit also highlighted commemorative events planned in the two countries to mark the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and India.

While some of the early commemorative events for 70th anniversary got rescheduled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a serious border standoff began in May 2020 when China decided to mobilise troops in the areas bordering Ladakh on an unprecedented scale.<sup>120</sup> Setting aside existing agreements for ensuring peace and tranquillity in the border area, the Chinese began to unilaterally alter the status quo of the LAC by capturing key territories at multiple locations of

unresolved boundary which compelled counter deployment of troops by India.<sup>121</sup> While a modicum of disengagement emerged through dialogue at the local military commander level, a deadly clash broke out between Indian and Chinese troops in the Galwan Valley.<sup>122</sup> An Indian army patrol verifying Chinese troops disengagement was attacked by Chinese troops disregarding prior consensus. In the melee, at least 20 Indian soldiers and an unconfirmed number of Chinese troops were killed in a hand-to-hand battle involving stones and clubs, some wrapped with barbed wire.<sup>123</sup> While there have been scuffles involving troops from both sides even earlier due to differing perceptions of the LAC demarcating unresolved boundary, the Galwan clash denoted the first death and the deadliest clash between India and China since 1967.<sup>124</sup>

### **Tracing Antecedents of the Ladakh Imbrolio**

Unresolved boundary issues between India and China has remained a key source of friction between the two countries from the beginning and was the *casus belli* of the 1962 war. Since 1993, there has been ongoing engagement on boundary issues through Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) between the two militaries.<sup>125</sup> The agreement on “the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question” was concluded in 2005 in order to seek a political settlement of the boundary question in the context of overall and long-term interests of the two countries.<sup>126</sup> Accordingly, there existed continuous engagement between Delhi and Beijing through both diplomatic and military channels. As highlighted earlier, in the second informal summit in 2019 Modi and Xi deliberated on the boundary issue and agreed to progress the special representative dialogue towards a mutually acceptable settlement of boundary issues.

Unarguably, the unresolved boundary and differing perceptions of the LAC have remained a persistent source of concern in the bilateral dynamics between India and China, which have been recognised at the highest level in both countries. Other irritants include issues related to trade and differing views on geopolitical issues at the regional and global level, which have been discussed in

the previous sections. China's belligerence and assertive approach to escalate the boundary dispute during the COVID-19 pandemic has indeed been puzzling. India's Foreign Minister S Jaishankar conceded that there exist some differences in perceptions in the LAC. However, given the existing arrangement of addressing these contentious challenges, he confessed that "we have very large number of Chinese forces [on border] and frankly, we are at a loss to know why."<sup>127</sup>

Why has China decided to initiate this dangerous brinkmanship against India, and what are its objectives and the desired end state at the strategic and operational level are questions that continues to puzzle sinologists and strategic commentators, both in India and around the world. Various hypotheses about possible reasons of extant border standoff include Xi's attempt to divert domestic attention from COVID-19 mismanagement,<sup>128</sup> Beijing's increased sensitivity to questions of sovereignty during the pandemic,<sup>129</sup> a response to India's construction of roads and airstrips adjacent to the LAC,<sup>130</sup> India's abolition of Article 370,<sup>131</sup> dissuading India from becoming a close partner of the US,<sup>132</sup> and teaching an assertive India a lesson by defeating it militarily.<sup>133</sup>

The preceding sections, drawing from the assessments of Chinese perceptions of the five volumes of the Blue Book series from 2013-18, highlight a trend of growing antagonism in Chinese perceptions towards India in general and a pessimistic outlook regarding the future contours of India-China bilateral dynamics in particular. To what extent these perceptions shaped the latest standoff would be difficult to assess at this stage. However, some recent explorations of Chinese perceptions broadly correlate with these trends.

In March 2020, Yun Sun provided an overview of Chinese strategic assessment of India in the context of bilateral impetus towards rapprochement notwithstanding mutual distrust and perceptions of deep hostility.<sup>134</sup> She noted a discernible shift in China's policy towards India in the post Doklam period. Lessons of Doklam had led to reassessment of India's strategic capability and resolve by the Chinese. The simplistic and static view of India's inferior status in the regional power hierarchy got recalibrated. She

argued that in a rare display China's diplomatic playbook, China has been actively promoting closer ties as rapprochement. Similar to the arguments highlighted in the blue book, she argued that Beijing's national security priorities unequivocally lie in the western Pacific and India is not a primary threat. A conflict with India, even if it results in Chinese victory, does not ameliorate China's key security challenges in the Pacific. A rupture in relations with India would further enhance China's strategic risks in the Pacific. At the same time, China remains profoundly suspicious of India's strategic ambitions and intentions.

Given the prevalence of mutual distrust and hostility due to irreconcilable structural differences, she remained sceptical about the unprecedented official elevation of India-China relations in its 70th anniversary year in 2020. At the same time, Yun Sun considered it almost inconceivable that China would deliberately prompt a confrontation to change the status quo in South Asia notwithstanding subtle changes in China's strategic calculations. In her view, the Chinese duality of 'formal rapprochement on the surface versus distrust and hedging in private' is likely to continue in future.

In broad correlations with Chinese perceptions contained in the blue book, Yun Sun argued that the apprehension about closer alignment between the US and India has been a major driver for rapprochement by Beijing since there has been no fundamental change in the other determinants of India-China dynamics, namely, the unresolved boundary, trade imbalance, Pakistan and divergent views on regional order. She also pointed to divergent perspectives within the Chinese policy circle about US-India relations and its implications. Chinese civilian observers and diplomats consider US-India alignment as a tactical expediency given the huge divergences in their geopolitical perspectives. However, Chinese defence strategists and security experts remain 'concerned about the substance of the growing India-US ties' and consider that material and diplomatic benefits of alignment with the US has 'emboldened New Delhi to pursue risky policies vis-à-vis Pakistan in addition to a more assertive negotiating posture towards China.'

Assessments drawn from the blue book in this chapter also correlate with the review of Chinese perceptions undertaken by Antara Ghoshal Singh.<sup>135</sup> She argues that “China in the last five years has defined and redefined India’s status and role in its strategic planning.” A section of the Chinese scholarship on India has been pointing towards the progressive erosion of the very foundation for strategic cooperation between the two countries and the downward trajectory in China and India ties. Till 2013-14, there existed significant cynicism about India’s great power potential and China hoped for India’s acquiescence for a China-led regional order in Asia. With the passage of time, Chinese perceptions evolved to recognise India “as its principal challenger in the secondary strategic direction.” Regarding future contours of India-China relations, she rather perceptively argued that “The principle of ‘strategic competition and tactical cooperation’ is most likely to dominate China’s India policy in the coming years. ‘Appeasement’, ‘strategic patience’ and ‘teaching India a lesson’ are all considered viable options, as China awaits the right time for these different means.”

Yun Sun again revisited this issue after the Galwan clash. Even though she had previously considered China’s deliberate attempt to provoke a conflict ‘inconceivable’, she argued that “the Ladakh clash should not have been a surprise” in view of the growing list of accumulated grievances highlighted earlier.<sup>136</sup> Based on inputs from Chinese government analysts, she argued that while others may consider the Chinese approach to antagonise India unwise but “China believes it needs to stand up to India whatever the cost.” The immediate trigger for the standoff was India’s infrastructure build-up in Ladakh, that is, road and airstrip. However, in her view, these were tactical considerations. At the strategic level, Chinese officials seem to have concluded that India was leveraging China’s weaknesses to make territorial gains in the disputed region. One Chinese scholar considered India’s infrastructure push in the border areas as “an attempt to stab China in the back while China was trying to deal with the United States.”<sup>137</sup> In the Chinese perspective, India was taking advantage of China’s “distraction, vulnerability, and overextension in its foreign policy.” She further argued that the

current standoff may not have been premeditated. In line with “the China’s sovereignty obsession during the Covid times” hypothesis of Fravel,<sup>138</sup> she argued that “the unique timing of COVID-19, the context of the US-Chinese strategic rivalry and China’s self-perceived vulnerability” might have compelled a more robust response from China than “what would otherwise have been a relatively common interaction in the disputed border.”

Akin to the arguments posited in the Blue Book series, Yun Sun argued that since India has been considered to be “strategically unreliable,” China did not want to “acquiesce to India’s attempt to advance its position on territorial disputes to trade for concessions.” Such a concession would further embolden India for more aggressive behaviour in future. Since a strategic friendship with India is untenable, China decided to raise the ante on the border to frustrate New Delhi’s regional and global ambitions.

In a comprehensive review of Chinese perceptions post the Galwan clash, Antara Ghoshal Singh argued that the standoff at the LAC and the ensuing violent clash in the Galwan Valley took “China’s strategic community by storm” and highlighted “China’s many dilemmas vis-à-vis India.”<sup>139</sup> Chinese strategists consider the present conflict not an accident but an “inevitable result of India’s long-standing speculative strategy on the China-India border.”<sup>140</sup> Since Doklam, India seems to have been taking advantage of China’s unfavourable strategic environment on the border (through infrastructure build-up and re-organisation of the Kashmir State) and has shown no regard for China’s major interests and concerns. Beijing’s patience has run out with India’s intransigence and “China had to take a stand and teach India a lesson. In dealing with India, a tough diplomatic voice or strong criticism is not enough, India requires firm lessons and a fierce response.”<sup>141</sup>

In Chinese perceptions, India has already become a quasi-ally of the US and future prospects of India-China relations remain uncertain. Divergent views on regional and global issues has led to diminishing avenues for cooperation between the two countries. Growing strategic distrust has undermined mechanisms for effective management of divergences, which makes “violent conflicts” a new

normal.<sup>142</sup> Some Chinese commentators have also been challenging the prevalent strategic thinking in China about the need for maintaining peace with India since it is not a main strategic concern for China and have argued that a robust response against India will not only stabilise China's western front similar to the post-1962 war period but will also enhance China's deterrence in the Pacific. There is also noticeable lament among some Chinese commentators about not seizing China's claimed territories during the 1962 war through a premature and unilateral declaration of ceasefire that needs to be undone.<sup>143</sup>

In sharp contrast to these jingoistic views, some Chinese commentators have criticised those vying to “teaching India a lesson” and have considered such an approach as being “short-sighted.” They have warned that if China-India ties are damaged beyond repair, India on its own or in association with other countries will cause “endless trouble for China” given China's dependence on Indian Ocean route for trade and energy. In addition, such a scenario would accelerate the formation of “anti-China alliance” between the US, Japan, Australia, Vietnam, Indonesia and other countries to contain China's military and economic power in the Indo-Pacific.

While the proximate causative factors and Chinese strategic rationale for the present standoff will be known with certainty only through historical inquiry in the future, a trend towards progressive accumulation of grievances against India and the consequent hardening of Chinese perceptions towards India has been evident in recent years. As has been noted earlier, the Chinese strategic discourse on India, in recent years, contained a litany of complaints against India ranging from Delhi's growing assertiveness in bilateral relations on trade and border issues, India's increasingly favourable geopolitical profile vis-à-vis China, India's approach to reinforce its regional dominance in South Asia, India's approach to undermine BRI, India's growing demand for explicit support from China on various issues, namely, NSG, UNSC membership, Pakistan-based terrorism, etc. The Doklam standoff further reinforced these adversarial perceptions, which were seen as an attempt to undermine China's sovereignty. The Blue Book series for the year 2017 and

2018 has repeatedly highlighted a downward drift in the bilateral dynamics and the likelihood of India-China conflict due to India's intransigence and apparent lack of sensitivity towards Beijing's strategic concerns.

From China's perspective, the main factors shaping India-China relations include border disputes, India's strategic cooperation with other major powers and security competition between China and India in the IOR. The Chinese strategic community remains particularly concerned with the latter two issues and the possibility of India forming a kind of semi-alliance with the US and Japan to counterbalance China.<sup>144</sup>

### **Persistent Rival Image of India**

Seeing from the image theory perspective, the assessment of India-China relations in this chapter reflects the stereotype mental and emotional image of India highlighted in earlier in Chapter 2. An intricate interplay of four basic perceptual sinews—recognition of India's strategic potential as a future threat; an innate sense of China's civilisational superiority over India; India's propensity to align with the West; and India's hegemonic aspirations—have shaped an enduring stereotype mental and emotional image of India as a potential rival to China.

In times of bilateral tensions, Chinese discourse on India sharply focusses on the above perceptual imagery. A special issue on India in the July edition of *Globe magazine* (《环球》杂志), a bi-weekly published by Xinhua News Agency, sharply highlighted this fact. One essay in the magazine harked back to the arguments propounded in the fifties and argued that India has inherited the British Colonial mantle and has followed an expansionist strategy to ensure its security through strategic domination over “three buffer zones, two concentric circles and one inner lake.”<sup>145</sup> The three buffer zones refer to Afghanistan, Tibet and the Indian Ocean. Two concentric circles refer to neighbouring countries in South Asia in the inner circle while the outer circle refers to Southeast Asia and West Asia. The Indian Ocean is considered as an inner lake.<sup>146</sup> Similar views were expressed in a different essay published by *Globe magazine*

during the Doklam crisis, which highlighted that India has been implementing this strategy in a systemic manner since the fifties. India has snatched Kashmir, dismembered Pakistan, assimilated Sikkim as territory, has absolute control over Bhutan, continues with efforts to maintain strangle hold over South Asia and strives to turn the Indian Ocean into an inner lake. India has swallowed huge territories in Southern Tibet (Arunachal Pradesh) and covets Chinese territories in Aksai Chin.<sup>147</sup> Another essay described “uncontrollable great power impulse” as a key driver of India’s diplomatic and strategic engagement and wide prevalence of “China threat theory” in India. In addition, India has abandoned the doctrine of non-alignment and has shifted towards interest-based alignment with western powers in order to bolster its geopolitical standing. India has developed close partnerships with the US, Japan and Australia to operationalise the Indo-Pacific strategy, which aims to contain China.<sup>148</sup> Two essays compare and contrast the societal development (health, education and India’s caste system) and economic performance of the two countries and broadly emphasise China’s superiority over India. It has been argued that “some Indian scholars believe that it is necessary to learn from China in social development and economic construction.”<sup>149</sup> Regarding India’s military capabilities, one essay argued that due to the backwardness of the defence industry, India’s remains dependent on weapon import. Even though, India’s military power has been dismissively termed as “made in all nations,” the essay argued that India’s growing naval power has strategic salience for China. Similarly, India’s ability to strike strategic targets in China with long range ballistic missiles has also been acknowledged.<sup>150</sup>

In addition to the enduring persistence of the stereotype mental and emotional image of India, the above essays broadly confirm that Chinese views of India remain broadly characterised as marked by ‘ambivalence’, ‘mutual suspicion’ and ‘lack of mutual awareness, understanding and trust.’ However, it would be important to note that notwithstanding the hyper-nationalistic rhetoric about China’s superiority over India, Chinese perceptions of India also reflect multitude of its own internal contradictions and perceived vulnerabilities vis-à-vis India. Even though China has pulled

ahead of India in economic and military power, China's perceived vulnerabilities have, in essence, got accentuated.

In the Chinese view, India has played a spoiler in China's road to glory, providing a counter-narrative and acting as the pivot point of regional resistance to the Chinese narrative. China considers the Indo-Pacific construct as a comprehensive geopolitical design to contain China. India and the US are perceived as prime movers of the Indo-Pacific concept, which has combined its primary and strategic direction in a single geopolitical frame. Even though the correlation of forces equation remains in favour of China vis-à-vis India, China's strategic constraints in the employment of countermeasures allows India to take a range of assertive actions against China within a manageable threshold.

Off course, it has been emphasised that continued strategic tensions between two large neighbours are not desirable and efforts must be made to reduce this strategic mistrust. At the same time, it has been argued that India needs to bring about a significant change in its attitude and mindset towards China. While China expects India to respect its strategic concerns and recognise its needs to enhance economic engagement in South Asia and the IOR, Beijing seems impervious to India's sensitivity and characterises India's strategic concerns vis-à-vis China as geopolitical imagination.

In the Chinese view, the border dispute between India and China is not as intractable as the China-Japan dispute. At the same time, the border dispute is not considered as simply a technical issue of cartographical nature or a reflection of broader bilateral geopolitical divergences but has been conflated with the larger structural contradictions among them in the global geopolitics. From the Chinese perspective, the resolution of the boundary disputes will have to wait until the broader geopolitical alignment has shifted in its favour. Similar to the issue of trade imbalance and providing China access to Indian goods, internal structural constraints in the Indian economy has been pointed as a causative factor. Similarly, it has been argued that China's presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean is a 'fait accompli' driven purely by the imperatives of economic expansion and India's perception of threat from China

is pure geopolitical imagination. Similarly, any suggestion of rethink on CPEC and Sino-Pak relations would essentially be a non-starter.

In sum, even though China has significantly pulled ahead of India in economic and military power in the 21st century, Beijing's perceived vulnerabilities vis-à-vis India and India's strategic potential as a prospective threat to China's strategic interests still remains valid. Chinese discourse on India-China relations are essentially a classic mix of bullying and beneficence, which characterises the Chinese foreign policy in the Xi era. Given the absolute lack of concern in China about India's sensitivity, future contours of India-China relations look uncertain.

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## 5. India-China Rivalry: Asymmetric No Longer

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Conventional wisdom, which matches with the academic literature, characterises India-China dynamics as ‘asymmetric’ or even ‘one-sided’ strategic rivalry. Notwithstanding its prevalence in the literature, this argument has some fundamental weaknesses and needs a closer examination. Unarguably, power asymmetry, with substantial Chinese advantage, has been a persistent characteristic of the India-China relations and is likely to remain or even grow further. India, being weaker in this dyad, naturally has a greater threat perception vis-à-vis China. However, as previous chapters have shown, notwithstanding the relative gap in strategic power and the overt display of a dismissive attitude towards India, Beijing has always factored India in its security calculus and has remained concerned with India’s ability to undermine China’s territorial interests and regional ambitions. In the contemporary period, as India expands its defence capabilities, extends its regional outreach and deepens its engagement with major powers, Beijing has begun to factor New Delhi into its strategic calculus even more seriously. Therefore, prevalent characterisation of India-China dynamics as ‘asymmetric rivalry’ needs a review in light of the Chinese evolving perceptions of India highlighted in the previous chapters.

It would be pertinent to highlight that rivalry categorisation is a dynamic social psychological process. Actors interpret the intentions of others based on past behaviour and on forecasts about the future behaviour. The core problem in the asymmetric rivalry hypothesis is that it does not take into account China’s mental and

emotional image of India. In addition, the evolutionary trend in Chinese perceptions of India has not been adequately examined. C Raja Mohan has argued that “many Sinologists point to the formal arguments in Beijing that it sees no threat from India and argue that the notion of ‘relentless rivalry’ is more in New Delhi’s strategic imagination.”<sup>1</sup> Given China’s growing concern with India’s rising strategic profile and its implications on Beijing’s economic and strategic interests highlighted earlier, this chapter will argue that Chinese perception of India-China rivalry is no longer asymmetric.

### **Asymmetric Rivalry Hypothesis**

Susan Shirk considers India-China rivalry as one-sided because ‘China looms large as an economic and political rival and as [a] security threat’ for India, while ‘India merits little attention and, even after India’s May 1998 nuclear tests, is not taken seriously as a security threat.’ She argues that underlying China’s relaxed attitude toward India is its confidence, verging on arrogance, about Chinese capability, and its dismissive views about Indian capabilities. She further contends that “Chinese military posture continues to be focused overwhelmingly on Taiwan and the US, not India.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, John Garver highlights that a ‘curious’ characteristic of the India-China relationship is the existence of ‘asymmetric perceptions of mutual threat,’ that is, a deep apprehension about China in India and absence of similar concern in China about India. Through a comparison of official Indian and Chinese security statements and Indian and Chinese foreign/security policy journals, he argues that while the broad strategic narrative in India posits China as a serious threat, China’s ‘public media’ systematically downplays Indian threats to China’s security.<sup>3</sup>

Echoing similar views, Tien-Sze Fang argues that India-China relations are constrained by the asymmetry of their threat perceptions. While India continues to perceive China as a major security threat, Beijing has not identified India as an immediate adversary. Although there is growing acknowledgement of India as a rising power, China’s perceived threat from India is far less than that from other countries, such as the US.<sup>4</sup> Positing India-China dynamics as a positional

rivalry for status, Xiaoyu Pu points towards asymmetry in the status and perceptions. He argues that China perceives India to be less of a status threat as its material capabilities are greater than India's and its status position is entrenched in global institutions.<sup>5</sup>

Characterisation of India-China dynamics as an asymmetric rivalry is primarily driven by three basic contentions. First, there is an argument about asymmetry in perceptions highlighting greater security concern in India vis-à-vis China. The second argument points towards comparative power and status asymmetry between India and China. The third contention highlights that while India considers China as 'principal rival' or the most serious security threat, Beijing claims India as a third-tier security priority behind domestic and external challenges in the East Asian littorals.

### **Strategic Rivalry—Theoretical Perspective**

Strategic rivalries are defined as relationships in which decision-makers have singled out other states as distinctive competitors and enemies posing some actual or potential military threat. Actors interpret the intentions of others based on earlier behaviour and on forecasts about their future behaviour. Thomson argues that "capability asymmetry does not preclude rivalry but it does make it less probable. Nor are rivals defined solely by intense conflicts of interest. Rivals must be selected. Three selection criteria appear to be most important. The actors in question must regard each other as (a) competitors, (b) the source of actual or latent threats that pose some possibility of becoming militarized, and (c) enemies."<sup>6</sup> He also argues that "other things being an equal symmetric capability, the symmetric capability should be expected to make rivalry more likely and more enduring."<sup>7</sup> However, analysing the rivalry data set, Klein and others have found an overwhelming majority of rivalry cases asymmetric, that is, between states with significant power disparity. In their view, "the continued and significant presence of asymmetric disputes in mature rivalries suggests that rivalry can be sustained even between states of divergent capabilities."<sup>8</sup> Given this correlation between power symmetry and rivalry, Diehl has argued that "any understanding of hostile or rivalrous behaviour between

pair of states is better accounted by social identity formulations than those based on material capability.”<sup>9</sup>

Decision-makers’ perception of threats is considered as a key factor in the formulation of social identity. Strategic rivalries, which are driven by the mutual perception of security threat, might be thought of as the reverse image of cooperative special relationships where there exists mutual desire to foster friendly relations. In other words, friendship and animosity require complementarity and reciprocity of emotional response. Diehl and Goertz emphasise that a rivalry relationship by definition is a dyadic one. “On the personal level, a ‘loving’ relationship is when there is love on both sides, and a happy marriage is one in which both are content. We do not deny that there may be asymmetries, but those asymmetries help define the relationship, which is a combination of factors on both sides of the rivalry.”<sup>10</sup> The basic argument here is that there cannot be a “one-sided rivalry.” As discussed in previous chapters, India-China rivalry has never been one-sided and this enduring rivalry is essentially shaped by mutual distrust and strategic dilemma from both sides.

Even though, military competition and frequency of militarised disputes are no longer the sole criteria for characterising dyadic relations as one of rivalry since states can still be rivals even if they do not clash directly in war or lesser military skirmishes because of deterrence or other reasons. However, the severity of rivalry often gets reflected through scale and frequencies of militarised confrontations. Patterns discernible over a period of time can signal changes in the rivalry relationship and conflict behaviour. Two major studies on nature and contours of India-China rivalry, based on the compilation of Militarised Interstate Dispute (MID), provides mixed assessments about the bilateral relations.<sup>11</sup>

Gary Goertz and his colleagues have coded all state relations according to a five-point peace scale: severe rivalry, lesser rivalry, negative peace, warm peace and security community; the latter two being a subset of the ‘positive peace’ realm. In so far as India-China relations are concerned, they have classified the period of 1947-50 as negative peace when the two countries considered each other as neither a friend nor enemy. This was followed by a period of

severe rivalry, commencing 1950 onwards. In their view, bilateral relations entered a transition phase in 1987 until 1991, with gradual improvement in the bilateral relations. The relationship from 1991 to 1996 has been classified as a period of lesser rivalry with reduced risk of confrontation despite the presence of unresolved disputes. With the progressive expansion of cooperation through trade and bilateral engagement during this period, they have coded bilateral relations from 1996 to 2006 as negative peace with a considerable reduction in bilateral friction even as unresolved issues persisted.<sup>12</sup>

Thompson and his team note the existence of uninterrupted rivalry between India and China from 1948 onwards with asymmetric, spatial and positional attributes. While asymmetrical attributes refer to the comparative superiority of China in military capability, spatial and positional attributes define strategic competition between India and China over territory and status. In their assessment, “the prospect for a significant and permanent de-escalation of this rivalry in the near future is not promising. The two states are pre-disposed by their size and improving economic development to compete for leadership of an expanded Asia in the generation to come.”<sup>13</sup> It would be pertinent to note that notwithstanding asymmetry in military capability, India-China dynamics have been defined as ‘uninterrupted rivalry’ not as ‘asymmetric rivalry.’

### **Perceptual Shift in the Chinese Threat Perception**

As highlighted in Chapter 2, numerous commentators have been highlighting a noticeable shift in Chinese perceptions, particularly after India’s nuclear test in 1998. Jing Dong Yuan, in his analysis of Chinese perceptions in the aftermath of the nuclear test, argues that Beijing is paying increasing attention to India’s drive for great power status through diplomatic initiatives and military build-up. He highlights that quite a few Chinese analysts also see India’s ambitions as threatening China’s fundamental security interests. New Delhi is seen as seeking to further consolidate its dominance in South Asia and control of the Indian Ocean, and develop minimum but credible deterrence against China.<sup>14</sup> In another article, he argues that whereas in the past China has tended to be dismissive about

recognising India as a peer competitor, Beijing is paying increasing attention to India's assertive diplomacy at the regional and global level, its defence modernisations and its growing cooperation with the US.<sup>15</sup>

Agreeing with Yuan's assessment, Shaun Randol argues that while China's current policies and perceptions toward India tend to be more dismissive or passive, there are signs that the pendulum is beginning to swing the other way. In the new emerging paradigm, she notes a confounding geopolitical image of India as 'rival, competitor and friend.' She further highlights that the 'core issue' in formulating China's view towards India is its growing engagement with other powers (the US, Japan and Australia), which heightens China's defensive instincts.<sup>16</sup> Through her empirical research on Chinese strategic literature, Lora Saalman has also notes a pronounced perceptual evolution in Chinese views about India, its growing military capabilities and expanding strategic ties with other powers. She argues that China's attitudinal change toward India began in 2000 and intensified after 2005. She posits US-EU lifting of sanctions and export control restrictions on India in 2001 and 2005 as a temporal bookend for Chinese perceptual shifts. In her view, although the majority of Chinese analysts do not perceive a direct military threat from India in the short to medium-term, there exists a nascent 'threat perception' regarding India's military modernisation in general and its growing naval power in particular.<sup>17</sup>

Selina Ho argues that China's relations with India are undergoing a period of transition and gradual policy adjustments, which are being driven by shifts in China's perception of India. These perceptual shifts in China's estimation of India have been precipitated by a number of geostrategic developments that include India's rising strategic profile, its growing strategic engagements with major powers, China's strategic and economic interests in the Indian Ocean and India's 'Look East' policy. Noting a high degree of ambivalence and substantial contradiction in China's emotional and mental image of India, she argues that "China's current view of India is caught between its traditional low regard of India and the image of a rising India with the capacity to affect China's regional

and international interests.” In her view, even though China still does not perceive a direct military threat from India, Delhi’s growing strategic cooperation with major powers has heightened Chinese apprehension about its comprehensive and concerted containment. These developments have significantly elevated India’s standing in China’s foreign policy priorities.<sup>18</sup>

As argued in Chapter 2, the *Science of Military Strategy* (2013) provides a critical window of China’s institutional perception of India. Even though the *Science of Military Strategy* (2013) may not be the official military strategy of PRC, it has been argued that this capstone publication of PLA is published through a very high level of review and it contains informed views of many of the PLA’s leading strategists, some of whom are involved in the formulation of strategic policies and operational doctrine. The *Science of Military Strategy* considers India as a major emerging power whose international status is improving every day. Therefore, understanding trends in India’s military strategy have “an important significance for understanding and grasping the world and regional strategic setup”. The *Science of Military Strategy* (2013) highlights that ‘omni-directional deterrence’ defines India’s broad strategic concept in the post-Cold War era, which aims “to ‘discourage’ the United States, ‘deter’ China, and ‘deal with’ Pakistan.” Among these, ‘deterring’ China is India’s primary focus, “because it thinks that only by ‘deterring’ China will it be able to ‘deal with’ Pakistan and have the possibility of ‘discouraging’ the United States.” Regarding future trajectory of India’s strategy, it argues that with enhanced national power, “India’s strategic objectives may advance from regional dominance toward global participation, its strategic guidance will put more emphasis on active offense, its strategic deployments will be reflected more in its intentions to control the South Asian subcontinent and the Indian Ocean”.<sup>19</sup>

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, Chinese perceptual shifts about India have become even more pronounced in the last five years, which has been highlighted by Chinese scholars as to the existence of “four C” (that is, Cooperation, Competition, Conflict and Coordination) in the current relationship between China and India.

With India's rising strategic profile in the regional and global affairs, it has been acknowledged that the bilateral interests of China and India overlap with increasingly complex geopolitical entanglements and competition. Notwithstanding efforts to enhance cooperation, competition and strategic divergences have been intensifying. Even though some kind of readjustment in India-China dynamics was anticipated in China, India's economic and diplomatic dynamism has, in essence, redefined the contours of India-China dynamics, and from the Chinese perspective strategic competition between two countries has begun to intensify. In Chinese analysts' view, China's largest obstacle to promoting cooperation with India is the existence of persistent security dilemma due to mutual suspicion and lack of trust.

India's continued opposition to OBOR, assertive approach in regional geopolitics and growing strategic cooperation with major powers has caused great consternation in China. In comparison with the favourable strategic environment of India as evidenced by the growing recognition of its great power status, strategic constraints on China have progressively increased with progressive deterioration in the US-China relations. As highlighted in Chapter 4, there has been a noticeable sharpness and truculence in the analytical tenor about growing strategic competition with India from 2014 onwards in the Chinese literature reviewed in this book, and has even begun to hint at the likelihood of conflict. It has been with the growing influence of China and the rise of India that the strategic competition between China and India will increase and there exists a possibility of India-China relation to 'go astray.' Off course, Chinese scholars repeatedly attribute India's geopolitical imagination of viewing China as a threat as the root cause of the extant intensification in the strategic competition.

India-China relation did nearly went 'astray' during the ten month long tense standoff in Ladakh. Although the process of gradual disengagement is still ongoing since February 2021, there is no clarity about proximate causative factors and Chinese strategic rationale for Ladakh standoff which will be known through future historical enquiry. However, Chinese narrative about Ladakh

standoff, highlighted in Chapter 4, highlights accumulated Chinese grievance, perceived vulnerability and entrenched rival image of India.

### **Asymmetric No Longer**

Noting these perceptual shifts in Beijing's perception of India, Manjeet Pardesi argues that "contrary to Shirk and Garver's arguments, India-China rivalry is not quite as one-sided as is often claimed and believed."<sup>20</sup> Even if the Chinese were less concerned about India in the past, Chinese analysts have taken note of India's rising economic and strategic profile as well as its strategic implications for China. India is now factored far more seriously in their conception of the emerging world order and with it the emerging strategic architecture of the Asia-Pacific region. India's economic growth and changing relationship with the US and Japan is viewed by Chinese analysts from a balance-of-power perspective and for its implications for China's security and national interests. In his explorations about rivalry initiation between India and China, Pardesi establishes that India-China rivalry, in fact, began as one-sided positional rivalry in 1947 due to Nationalist China's apprehension about Indian imperial design over Tibet, which continued even after the creation of PRC in 1949. Spatial element in the rivalry got added after the annexation of Tibet by China. By 1951, the rivalry became complex with positional competition for status at the apex of the Asian power hierarchy along with the spatial dimension of disputed boundary. In contrast, India viewed China as a fellow victim of colonialism and has perceived China as a "partner" in postwar/postcolonial Asia. Only after the 1950-51 invasion/annexation of Tibet, India began to view China as an 'expansionist/hegemonic' rival. Pardesi argues that the India-China rivalry is asymmetric only to the extent that while India perceives China as their 'principal rival', China's considers potential confrontation with the US as its most pressing security concern. "However, this does not imply that the Chinese have tended to ignore security concerns vis-à-vis India. While India may not be China's 'principal rival', India continues to remain a 'strategic rival' in China's security calculus."<sup>21</sup>

Unarguably, there exists power and status asymmetry between China and India. Although at the time of the emergence of two countries as newly independent nation states both countries had near parity, China has emerged as a stronger economic power since the start of reforms in the late seventies. Despite India's rapid rise in the past three decades, the power gap between India and China is still wide. In addition, China's international status is also more established with membership of many great power clubs (viz., UNSC, NSG, etc.), which India still aspires to join.

As argued earlier, capability asymmetry does not necessarily preclude rivalry. However, this apparent power asymmetry does not provide China with an overwhelming advantage over India as evidenced in the recent Ladakh standoff. While Xiaoyu Pu considers India as an asymmetric competitor, he argues that China has pursued an 'ambivalent accommodation' strategy to assuage India's status aspirations to some extent even though China does not perceive India as a major threat.<sup>22</sup> Paul Diehl points out that this accommodative approach might be an indicator that India poses some threat to China as a rival, but it also suggests that such a strategy is designed to mitigate the worst of rivalry.<sup>23</sup>

Chinese scholars argue that although China is superior to India in overall strength, its investment of power in dealing with India is not necessarily larger to India. The international and regional environment for India is more favourable than China. Since India is not a main challenger of the current international system, its relations with the dominant countries are more certain than China. While India's provocation of China will get support or at least the acquiescence of major powers, China's countermeasures will be considered by these countries to be regional hegemonic behaviour.<sup>24</sup>

Regarding apparent asymmetry in India-China dyadic perceptions of China being India's 'principal rival' and China's perception of its 'principal rivalry,' it needs to be highlighted that this is a needless conflation of the notion of 'strategic rivalry' with 'principal rivalry.' In his seminal article on 'Principal Rivalry,' Thompson argues that states with multiple rivals tend to rank order their significance. A given state's 'principal rival' is a single state

selected over its other opponents that presumably poses the most serious challenge to its security.<sup>25</sup> Exploring this concept of the principal rival, Thompson and his colleagues argue that the utility of this ‘principal rival’ categorisation remains to be demonstrated empirically, but it is conceivable that rivals may treat principals differently than non-principal rivals.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, even though a state may focus on its principal rival more than its non-principal rivals, it does not imply that non-principal rivals are completely disregarded from the security calculus. It needs to be noted that China always has multiple rivals since its independence. Even in the 1950s, China’s ‘principal rival’ was the US. Although India was not a principal rival even at that time, intensification of strategic rivalry with India has led to the 1962 war.

The preceding discussions have clearly highlighted that India has been and continues to be a ‘strategic rival’ in Chinese perception even though it is not categorised by China as its ‘principal rival.’ Eventhough phased disengagement in Ladakh still continues, India-China relation is cetrianly at inflection point. At the core of the recent standoff has been the deepening mistrust between the two countries driven by their perceptions and expectations of each other in the larger context of global relations. In sum, cognition of rival perceptions in India-China dyad is no longer asymmetric.

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## 6. Future Contours of India-China Rivalry and India's Options

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With the simultaneous rise of China and India on their relative trajectories, geopolitical realignments and balance of power equations are still evolving in the Indo-Pacific region. All major powers, including China and India, are continuously manoeuvring for geopolitical advantages and relative gain through various permutations and combinations of regional geopolitical equations. In this era of geopolitical complexity, India-China relations have exhibited the simultaneous existence of cooperative, competitive and conflictual impulses in varying proportions.

Even after Doklam standoff, Paul F. Diehl had argued that India-China rivalry is not as severe as it once was. In his view, rivalry dynamics between India-China dyad appeared to be as much over status and regional influence as other substantive concerns while territorial disputes lingered in the background. However, he has also pointed that minor incidents along the border have the potential to escalate and become part of a broader regional struggle for influence. Three years later, after Ladakh standoff, veracity of the above assessment about dyadic rivalry between India-China appears doubtful. While Indian Commentators consider the recent border dispute as “an implacable decline in India-China ties”,<sup>1</sup> Chinese scholars argue that bilateral relation between India-China currently stands at “lowest point since the border war of 1962”.<sup>2</sup>

Eventhough tense standoff in Ladakh continues to unwind, bilateral relations between India-China appears to be at inflection point and future trajectory remains uncertain. At the time of this

writing, India-China relation is at a cross road with three possible pathways i.e restrained ambivalence, estranged neighbours and a further downward trajectory towards armed conflict. This chapter examines the feasibility and implications of these alternative future scenarios along with policy options for India to manage India-China relation.

### **Restrained Ambivalence—Competitive Coexistence**

The state of bilateral relations, which existed prior Ladakh standoff, could be characterised as ‘restrained ambivalence’ with the simultaneous existence of cooperative and competitive impulses. A combination of factors ranging from the thorny issue of territorial disputes, internal issues of domestic stability, external overlapping spheres of influences, and ever-widening geopolitical horizons have proven to be a rather insurmountable obstacle for effective rapprochement. Adding to these rather potent complexities is the emerging economic competition over resources, markets, and bases, which belie hope in the oft-repeated assertion about there being adequate space for both countries to grow together.

Notwithstanding these impediments to bilateral rapprochement, both countries had managed to incrementally to enhance strategic communication and enhance mutually beneficial cooperation. However, Ladakh standoff has reset bilateral relation to a new normal. Notwithstanding prevailing lack of strategic trust, there exists a faint feasibility of restoring bilateral ties to *status quo ante* with emergence of a mutually acceptable resolution of the situation in eastern Ladakh in the near future. A top level political guidance based on frank exchange of views may provided a roadmap for comprehensive review bilateral dynamics.

However, it needs to be remembered that notwithstanding these efforts towards mutual reconciliation, India-China dynamics will continue to exhibit the dual characteristics of economic and political engagement along with geopolitical balancing behaviour even in the future. The key policy challenge for both countries would be to manage strategic divergences through effective strategic communication so that differences do not become disputes.

## Estranged Neighbour—A Sino-Indian Cold War

While there exists a possibility of India-China relations eventually reverting back to 'restrained ambivalence,' Chinese perceptions reviewed in earlier chapters point towards progressive estrangement. It is argued that the Doklam crisis, even though it was resolved peacefully, had left a deep scar in the bilateral relations. The fall out of Ladakh imbroglio could take even much longer to heal.

The Sino-Indian rivalry has, in fact, become multidimensional, expanding to both land and sea, and strategic frictions have been growing at the bilateral, regional and multilateral levels. While India's lack of support on OBOR has emerged as an Achilles heel in the progress of China's OBOR, India's growing strategic cooperation with the US and Japan is viewed as a serious concern. China perceives that with a favourable strategic environment in support of India's growing strategic and economic stature, India is not only attempting to squeeze China out from South Asia and the Indian Ocean but through its growing alignment with the US, Japan, Australia and few Southeast countries also aiming to contain China. India's assertive stance towards China through 'issue by issue' diplomacy on the bilateral issue is seen as an attempt to coerce China in making a concession on boundary and trade issues.

As highlighted Chapter 4, Chinese strategists consider the Ladakh standoff not an accident but an inevitable result of India's long-standing speculative strategy towards China. In Chinese perceptions, India has already become a quasi-ally of the United States and future prospects of India-China relations remains uncertain. Divergent views on regional and global issues has led to diminishing avenues for cooperation between the two countries and growing strategic distrust has undermined mechanisms for effective management of divergences.

While these expressions of rhetorical discontent could be an approach in strategic communication to convey disaffection with typical Chinese characteristics, it needs to be highlighted that the 'restrained ambivalence' in the bilateral relations, even though it may not have turned into a 'India-China Cold War,' could be headed in that direction with increased tension and friction in the bilateral

relations. Given the antagonistic Chinese perceptions highlighted in the previous chapters, political relation between India and China may remain adversarial and contentious in the short to medium term.

### **Menacing Storm Clouds of War on the Horizon**

Writing on the occasion of 40th anniversary of Sino-Indian War of 1962, John Garver argues that “the probability of another war between India and China is not great but it does exist.”<sup>3</sup> The unresolved border dispute, a major uprising in Tibet and China’s intervention in the Indo-Pak conflict could be three situations that individually or in combination may cause an armed conflict. In addition to these legacy issues, sources of strategic tension that could result in a potential conflict between two nuclear neighbours have now increased and include: growing strategic dilemma in both countries due to their simultaneous rise and overlapping sphere of influence; strategic competition for resources and bases; China’s growing presence in the Indian Ocean and South Asia; China’s discontent with India’s assertive approach in the regional diplomacy; India’s growing strategic cooperation with other major powers fuelling apprehension of containment through collusion and India’s apprehension about China’s belligerence.

Mohan Malik argues that a sharp reversal of China’s economic fortune could an additional factor, more so if the acceleration of India’s economic growth coincides with a decline in China’s economic growth.<sup>4</sup> The fear of strength erosion over a period of time and fear of encirclement may induce China to attack its potential challenger India in accordance with the classical postulates of the power transition theory. Kugler argues that a slowdown in power growth relative to a potential challenger can bring about a shift in external behaviour “from one that favours engagement and accommodation to one that rewards containment and confrontation.”<sup>5</sup> According to some Chinese strategic thinkers, the demonstrative effect of a short and swift victory in a limited war with India would reduce India’s strategic significance as a balancer and counterweight to China in the region and would send a strong message to others in the region.<sup>6</sup>

Both countries were nearly on the precipice of an overt conflict during the intense militarised standoff at the Doklam plateau, which was evident in the angry rhetoric emanating from Chinese media.<sup>7</sup> As highlighted in Chapter 4, angry rhetoric was even shriller during the Ladakh standoff. Even though the both crises were averted peacefully, lingering misperceptions continue to persist. “The continued buildup of forces by both sides near the border as well as in the Indian Ocean signifies that both sides have not yet fully made the compromises necessary to avert a future conflict from erupting.”<sup>8</sup> Chinese literature reviewed in the previous chapters argue that a negative spiral in bilateral relations fuelled by strategic misperceptions and security dilemma might result in inadvertent conflict with disastrous consequences for both countries and the region as a whole.

Garver argues that while a war with India would be politically costly for China, a series of factors, “the most important being opening the door to Chinese pre-eminence in the Indian Ocean, could weigh heavily in favour of war.”<sup>9</sup> Revising his earlier postulate about the potential triggers cited above, he highlights that the boundary dispute though unresolved is quite manageable and China’s insecurity about the Tibetan uprising in the future has also ameliorated to some extent. However, China’s insecurity about its critical SLOCs has emerged as its major concern in addition to India’s obstruction of growth of China’s position in South Asia and the IOR as a key strategic challenge. Graver’s assessment of China’s insecurity in the maritime domain vis-à-vis India broadly echoes the Chinese assessments reviewed in earlier chapters. Therefore, “selection of the maritime domain as the arena for a Chinese ‘lesson’ to India could be more attractive for Beijing than a conflict on land. A Chinese victory at sea would demonstrate China’s arrival as a leading naval power and, thus, as a leading global power.”<sup>10</sup>

Kyle Mizokami highlights that a war between India and China would be short, nasty, brutal, and multidimensional (land, sea and air) with far-reaching consequences for the global economy and the IOR. Given the balance of power and geographic constraints, the war

would be limited in scope and would almost certainly fail to prove decisive. She argues that both sides have almost certainly concluded this, which is why there hasn't been a war despite numerous tense standoffs in the past.<sup>11</sup>

Vipin Narang argues that there exists a high level of strategic stability between India and China, and this stability is driven by the pledge of 'No First Use' (NFU) by both along with the adoption of assured-retaliation strategies through second strike.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, neither side has shown any intention nor incentive to threaten the survivability of the other's second-strike capability. As a rival dyad, India and China, are unique for they accept mutual vulnerability to each other's second strike, which meets all the requirement of Jervision 'nuclear revolution' where 'defence by deterrence' has become the default strategic choice.<sup>13</sup> Narang further argues that this implies that India and China, as a rising powers, are therefore free to engage in strategic competition without any real fear of a major conventional war or nuclear exchange. There will certainly be friction in the bilateral relations due to their competitive approach for resources and sphere of influences, including from legacy issues of the unresolved boundary dispute. However, minor skirmishes should be capped because neither has an incentive to move up the escalation ladder too rapidly or too high. In his views, the pathways to the escalation in the coming year—for friction to become fire—are difficult to fathom due to presence of mutual second-strike capability, even if there is localised conflict on land or sea.<sup>14</sup>

It would be pertinent to highlight that an armed confrontation would be an unwise move because both would be diminished to a lesser or greater degree. Sujan Chinoy argues that "Chinese strategists often forget that the age of teaching anyone a lesson is over. Unilateralism and military aggression, especially against a large country like India determined to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity at any cost, will simply not work."<sup>15</sup> In any case, both governments have thus far indicated their unwillingness to be trapped in this scenario.

## Pathways for Competitive Coexistence—India's Policy Option

As discussed above, the likely contours of India-China relation in short to medium term could be either a 'restrained ambivalence' or 'estranged neighbour'. A key consideration could be whether both countries can afford to have an antagonistic neighbour on its border or they wish to find a path towards competitive coexistence. Even if India-China relations reverts back to 'restrained ambivalence', the nature of bilateral dynamics will continue to exhibit the dual characteristics of economic and political engagement along with geopolitical balancing behaviour. A downward reversal in the bilateral dynamics and increased tensions on multiple fronts due to a variety of factors could lead to a limited or localised conflict not only on the land border but also at sea. Although the likelihood of an all-out large-scale war between China and India is unlikely given the formidable barriers of nuclear weapons, economic interdependence, political prudence and terrain, the possibility of localised and limited skirmishes is not.

Notwithstanding the existence of the mutual perception of threat, which is no longer asymmetric as argued earlier, strategic mistrust and strategic competition have become multi-domain and multi-dimensional; both sides have endeavoured to enhance bilateral cooperation and strategic communication. This does not mean that relations will continue to improve or that the decline in hostility is permanent. The competition—even though diminished—seems to be as much over status and regional influence with unresolved territorial disputes lingering in the background. At the same time, both sides have continued to expand their issue-based cooperation notwithstanding lingering strategic mistrust. Rory Medcalf characterises this simultaneous existence of growing competition along with deepening cooperation in Sino-Indian relations as 'competitive coexistence'.<sup>16</sup> He argues that whether this competition can be managed, reduced or allowed to worsen will depend, in large part, on the quality of diplomacy and trust-building efforts between the two rising powers.

The concept of ‘competitive coexistence’ has been used in biology to explain the stable coexistence of competing species in an environment through limited competition and resilience.<sup>17</sup> The term has been used to characterise relations between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In 1955, the Russians launched the doctrine of ‘peaceful coexistence,’ which argued that socialist states despite doctrinal incompatibility could peacefully coexist with the capitalist bloc. The US foreign policy approach in response was termed as a competitive coexistence that aimed at enhancing areas of cooperation while maintaining competition on issues of strategic divergences. Resultant detente led to a degree of political accommodation, arms-control agreement and trade, which was achieved by Russia and the US in the sixties and the seventies.<sup>18</sup> In recent times this term has been used by David Shambaugh<sup>19</sup> and Andrew Erickson<sup>20</sup> to characterise Sino-US relations.

The concept of competitive coexistence argues that while distrust and competition in the international system are unavoidable due to incompatible political systems, beliefs and interests among nation-states, resultant geopolitical frictions need to be managed to prevent escalation of strategic rivalry to the level of becoming something far more dangerous and potentially antagonistic. Rather than shying away from competition, states should embrace competition and must be willing to accept risks to protect their interest. Absence of resistance would only embolden the belligerent.

In the case of Sino-Indian relations, even though there exists a range of structural divergences and points of friction, there seems to be a mutual desire for seeking competitive coexistence. An approach towards managing strategic competition below the threshold of antagonism is evident even in Chinese literature reviewed in this book. Cuiping Zhu argues that “the strategic structural contradictions caused by the competition among China, India and the US in the Indian Ocean are inevitable. Therefore, the most important is how to control the conflict and maintain a situation of ‘fighting but never breaking up’.”<sup>21</sup> Prime Minister Modi in his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue highlighted this imperative of competitive coexistence in contemporary Asian geopolitics. He highlighted that “Asia of

rivalry will hold us all back. Asia of cooperation will shape this century. So, each nation must ask itself: Are its choices building a more united world, or forcing new divisions? It is a responsibility that both existing and rising powers have. *Competition is normal. But, contests must not turn into conflict; differences must not be allowed to become disputes.*”<sup>22</sup>

India's policy pathways for managing Sino-Indian dynamics within the competitive coexistence paradigm requires consideration of the following broad principles:

- **Competition is normal.** Mutual distrust and strategic competition between China and India are unavoidable given the conflicting national identities, political systems, values and interests. This competitive dynamics will persist for the foreseeable future. Both nations must learn to live with it for the long-term. There is no need to downplay divergences or strategic competition in official and public discourses.
- **Accepting the risk of escalation.** While India should not exacerbate strategic tension gratuitously, yet must grapple with and not shy away from it. India and China often have conflicting vital interests. India will uphold its interests even when China's efforts impinge upon them and generate friction. China seeks an advantage by opportunistically embracing risk and the friction and tension it generates. India will hold its ground and uphold its interests even when doing so entails some risk. While a large-scale conflict is improbable, India will cater to localised military contingencies that may arise on land or at sea. Countering China's grey zone or hybrid warfare strategy will be an area of priority.

To pursue an effective competitive strategy of its own, India must be willing to accept more risk. Indeed, China is constantly evaluating Delhi's strategic resolve to determine its tolerance for risk, friction and tension. Strategic communications must convey that India is also comfortable with a degree of friction and tension.

- **Using friction as a countermove.** Beijing pushes forward when its relentless probing fails to meet resistance. Nonetheless, in the

face of resistance, it relents. Resulting friction from competitive dynamics can recalibrate China's actions, threatening India's interest.

However, the display of strategic resolve in escalation dynamics will require a critical evaluation of India's strategic, military and diplomatic capabilities.

- **Not a zero-sum game.** Competitive coexistence rejects both unrealistic assumptions of early resolution of disputed issues and a pessimistic prediction of an inevitable drift to war, which is unlikely given the overwhelming costs and shared interests. Strategic competition does not preclude cooperation in areas of mutual interest. Notwithstanding seemingly intractable boundary dispute and predominantly rivalrous relations, areas of mutual cooperation have progressively enhanced. India will maintain its endeavour to explore newer areas of cooperation.
- **Opposing negative actions only.** India does not wish to seek estranged relations with China through wholesale antagonism; however, India seeks to counter China's negative actions that are out of step with international norms or prejudicial to India's security interests. India will acknowledge and encourage Beijing's positive actions.
- **Cooperation requires reciprocity.** Genuine reciprocity is essential to managing bilateral relations and pursuing collaborative achievements. While India remains ever willing to foster friendly relations with China and has been mindful of China's strategic concerns, China has not taken into account India's expectations and concerns. Rather, it has argued that India suffers from a 'victim' syndrome. To the extent that Beijing proves willingness to reciprocate, Delhi will cooperate to reduce tensions, pursue shared interests and achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.

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In recent years, there has been growing interest in deciphering the nature and contours of bilateral dynamics between India and China, since the contours bilateral dynamics between the two rising powers have potential implications for the evolving geopolitical order in the region and even beyond. This book is not about understanding the nature of rivalry dynamics between India and China but prominently focuses on China's mental and emotional image of India, which has remained an underexplored dimension in contemporary scholarship.

The aim of the book is two-fold. First, this book is an effort to analyse China's contemporary perceptual image about India primarily through the analysis of Chinese publications on the subject. Second, this book questions the prevalent notion of characterising India-China rivalry as 'one-sided' or 'asymmetric.'

Unarguably, power asymmetry, with substantial Chinese advantage, has been a persistent characteristic of India-China relations and is likely to remain or even grow further. India, being weaker in this dyad, naturally has a greater threat perception vis-à-vis China. However, this apparent power asymmetry does not provide China with an overwhelming advantage over India.

The book argues that India has been and continues to be a 'strategic rival' in Chinese perception even though it is not categorised by China as its 'principal rival.' In the contemporary period, as India expands its defence capabilities, extends its regional outreach and deepens its engagement with major powers, Beijing has begun to factor New Delhi into its strategic calculus even more seriously.



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₹ 980.00

  
KNOWLEDGE WORLD  
KW PUBLISHERS PVT LTD  
www.kwpub.in

ISBN 978-93-91490-01-0



9 789391 490010