

TALKING ABOUT A 'RISING CHINA'

**AN ANALYSIS OF INDIAN OFFICIAL
DISCOURSE 1996–2012**

PETER VAN DER HOEST

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रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

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E-mail: contactus@idsa.in
Website: <http://www.idsa.in>

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Introduction

Both India's Ministry of Defence (MOD) and India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) publish annual reports which include an overview of regional and bilateral developments. Unfortunately, these documents give little indication of India's foreign policy goals and ambitions, or any assessments of India's international surroundings. In the words of India's foremost strategic thinker Krishnaswamy Subrahmanyam, 'in India, in spite of our functioning democracy for five decades, there is no system of government coming out with white papers and documents, sharing its assessments, spelling out goals and objectives and our policies to achieve them'.¹ At the same time, there are many publications with collections of official speeches, documents and statements bundled in annual MEA publications, such as the *Foreign Affairs Record* and *India's Foreign Relations*. Taken together, they give an overview of how the official narrative over a rising China has developed in the period 1996-2012.

The C-mantras: Cooperation, Coordination, and Competition

China-India relations underwent significant change at the end of the Cold War, as was evident in the ground breaking visit of Rajiv Gandhi to China in 1988. Sensitive bilateral issues were discussed in newly institutionalized set-ups (such as the Joint Working Group), and gradually yielded results in the forms of bilateral agreements, frameworks, mechanisms and confidence-building measures. Moreover, under Prime Minister Narashima Rao's (1991—1996) New Delhi's foreign policy, as argued by Indian scholar

¹ Krishnaswamy Subrahmanyam, 'Grand Strategy for the First half of the 21st Century' in Krishnappa Venkatshamy and Princy George (eds.) *Grand Strategy for India: 2020 and Beyond*, New Delhi: Pentagon Security International, 2012, pp. 13.

Raja C. Mohan, 'crossed the Rubicon', He observes that, in the early 1990s, New Delhi's foreign policy underwent critical change through: (i) a loss of idealism; (ii) a focus on economics instead of politics; (iii) a denunciation of anti-Western thinking; and (iv) a transformation from a domestic socialist to global free market economy.² For India-China relations, this was reflected in a change towards a more future oriented policy, and a narrative that stressed 'mutual benefits' and 'friendship and cooperation'. In other words, it was argued that the economic development of China and India individually would also be beneficial to the other.

The year 1996 marked the first formal visit of a Chinese head of state to India. President Jiang Zemin's historical visit gave the Indian President, Shankar Dayal Sharma, the opportunity to reiterate the positive developments in bilateral relations since Rajiv Gandhi's trip to China in 1988. He said that '[t]he co-operation and friendship of Asia's two largest nations would be a powerful and enduring factor in promoting peace and stability in our continent and the world'. He also added that by working together,

we can explore a long-term vision of India-China relations, oriented to deal with the challenges of the 21st century. We can explore how our two nations should proceed along the path of good neighbourly relations that we have embarked upon. For our part, India seeks a relationship of constructive cooperation with our largest neighbour, China.³

For a long period of time, this rhetoric remained largely unchanged even though there were—and still continue to be—areas of disagreement and dispute. The main argument was that, through a policy of engagement and dialogue, India and China would be able to resolve misunderstandings, and create a deeper, broader and mutually beneficial bilateral relationship. The economic imperative for close cooperation remained dominant in

² Raja C. Mohan, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India's New Foreign Policy*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003.

³ Shankar Dayal Sharma, as quoted in 'India ready to work for a fair and reasonable solution to border dispute with China', Rediff, 29 November 1996, <http://www.rediff.com/news/1996/2811chin.htm>.

official discourse, even after Indian concerns over a growing trade imbalance started to appear in the late 2000s. At the same time, New Delhi and Beijing started expressing their similarities in a changing international structure: both were 'emerging economies in a multipolar world order'; 'Asian powers'; and 'immediate neighbours'; and had 'congruence on global issues like climate change, the financial order and the new global architecture'. As Jagannath Panda observes, this narrative first and foremost painted a 'liberal' and 'idealist' picture of India-China relations.⁴ As a result, there was little space in this account for realist apprehensions over the People Liberation Army's military modernization (except for China's nuclear proliferation, see section 3), China's posturing around the contested border, or Beijing's developing relations with South Asian countries.

It was the 2004/2005 annual report of the MOD that began to utter its concern over China's build-up of Comprehensive National Power, causing both 'awe' and 'nervousness' in some quarters. Meanwhile, officers from the armed services started to point at the growing gap in military power.⁵ Until the early 2000s, India had been able to keep up with China's military modernization, partly because it spends a higher percentage of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defence. As the graph below shows, the gap in military expenditure of the two countries began to grow rapidly after 2002. Four years later, in 2006, China's defence expenditures would double that of India. To a large extent, this rapid change can be explained by China's economic growth, which allowed it to raise its defense expenditure significantly in the 1990s and 2000s.

The publicly expressed concerns by the MOD on China's military modernization were not shared by the MEA, or by the Prime Minister. They insisted that India-China relations should not be scrutinized through the realistic prism of power politics, and the unilateral pursuit of national

⁴ Jagannath Panda, 'Competing Realities in China-India Multilateral Discourse, Asia's Enduring Power Rivalry', in *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 22, No.83, p. 71.

⁵ Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2004-2005*, New Delhi: Government of India, 2005, p. 8.

interests. In January 2005, India's Foreign Minister Natwar Singh maintained that

[t]here are many who look at India-China relations with the old mindset of 'balance of power' or 'conflict of interests', and see East Asia as a theatre of competition between these two countries. Such theories are losing relevance in today's fast-emerging dynamics of Asia's quest for peace and prosperity.⁶

For the time being, liberal arguments of growing interdependence and trade, and a certain confidence in China's benign intentions vis-à-vis India (as was evident by the ongoing peace and tranquillity on the border) lulled realist apprehensions over China's increased military capabilities—at least in the official narrative.

In 2008, there was a sudden shift in the discourse when Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee mentioned China being the first of India's most pressing and immediate security concerns: 'We are today faced with a new China. Today's China seeks to further her interests more aggressively than in the past, thanks to her phenomenal increase in capabilities after thirty years of reforms'. As a response, he continued that, India should 'develop more sophisticated ways of dealing with the new challenges posed by China'.⁷ One day later, the MEA issued a statement that Mukherjee's comment was not meant to imply that China was a threat to India. Nonetheless, Mukherjee's speech revealed a new tone in India's official discourse in which Chinese behaviour would now come under closer scrutiny, and friendly, cooperative bilateral relations would become less self-evident and more conditional. When the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao met with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the side-lines of the India-ASEAN Summit in October 2009, they agreed that peace and stability between India and China was essential for the Asian Century, and reiterated that

⁶ Natwar Singh, 'Inaugural Address at the 7th Asian Security Conference', 27 January 2005, <http://www.idsa.in/node/1553>.

⁷ Pranab Mukherjee, 'India's Security Challenges and Foreign Policy Imperatives' in *India's Foreign Relations - 2008*, (ed.) Avtar Singh Bhasin, New Delhi: Geetika Publishers, 2009, p. 244.

there was enough strategic space for the mutual development and cooperation of both countries.⁸ However, Singh also stressed the need for stronger political cooperation between the two sides in order to strengthen trust and understanding. Later that year, Singh stated that, despite the peace and tranquillity on the border and both countries becoming major trading partners, 'there is a certain amount of assertiveness on the part of the Chinese. I don't fully understand the reasons for it'.⁹ Although he did not make any specific mentions on where this perceived assertiveness was coming from, it is more than likely that Singh was referring to China's increased presence in India's extended neighbourhood: it was the Tibetan unrest in 2008 and China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea which was contributing to a sense of a more confident and assertive China. When specifically asked about the situation in the South China Sea, Foreign Minister Salman Kurshid said,

I do not think that this should be seen as something to be unduly alarmed about. But that it is something on which we would wish to express our concern and would be concerned is certainly very clear. But I do not think these are alarm bell issues.¹⁰

It is clear that, from the late 2000s, there was a change in the official discourse. Indian officials began to argue that China's rise presents India not only with opportunities for cooperation but also with new challenges, and that both countries not only have shared objectives, but also competing interests, which might lead to competition. In short, the strategic space that India and China were sharing, might (contrary to what Indian and

⁸ 'Salient briefing points by Secretary (East) N. Ravi of the Ministry of External Affairs on Prime Minister's meetings with the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao', in *India's Foreign Relations"2009*, Avtar Singh Bhasin (ed.), New Delhi: Geetika Publishers, 2010, p. 1640.

⁹ Manmohan Singh, 'A Conversation with Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh' Speech, Council for Foreign Relations, Washington D.C., 23 November 2009. Available at <http://www.cfr.org/india/conversation-prime-minister-drz-manmohan-singh/p20840> accessed 12 March, 2014.

¹⁰ Interview of External Affairs Minister to NDTV 24X7', in *India's Foreign Relations"2012*, Avtar Singh Bhasin (ed.), New Delhi: Geetika Publishers, 2013, p. 195.

Chinese officials had argued before) eventually *not* be big enough to avoid rivalry and competition. Going deeper into this geographical theme, Foreign Minister Kurshid stated that:

We have to understand that many of our neighbours have a relationship with China. You can't wish China away. China is also in the neighbourhood. They will have their relationship with China, just as we have our relationship with China, but I don't think that should be a cause of any concern . . . we must be there to ensure that we retain our place under the sun with our neighbours, and we will be there sometimes collaborating with China, sometimes cooperating, sometimes in competition.¹¹

This competition with China is often discussed in the context of China's forays in India's extended neighbourhood, and with references to China's quest for resources and energy. Foreign Minister Mukerjee talked about 'the geopolitical challenge as it [China] reaches out to various parts of the globe in search of raw materials and resources'.¹² Indian officials point out that such competition does not directly turn into a threat or rivalry. As a matter of fact, the official discourse stresses that competition might actually be a good thing: 'if you are in the same market place and you are competing for space, then of course there will be an actual competition. India encourages competition'.¹³ In general, by 2013, Indian discourse on how to manage relations with China changed from one that initially emphasized engagement and cooperation towards a more balanced view in which India-China relations are seen as a mixed bag of cooperation, coordination and competition.¹⁴

¹¹ 'Interview of External Affairs Minister with the *MINT*' *India's Foreign Relations "2012*, p. 230.

¹² Pranab Mukherjee, 'India's Security Challenges and Foreign Policy Imperatives', p. 244.

¹³ 'Interview of External Affairs Minister Salman Kurshid to Bloomberg TV India', in *India's Foreign Relations "2012*, p. 201.

¹⁴ During the BRICS Meeting in Durban 2013, Prime Minister Singh candidly told Indian reporters that the India-China relationship has 'elements of cooperation, coordination and competition'.

In the following pages, specific themes as they are being discussed in the official discourse are analysed in more detail.

The Border Dispute: 'Managing China-India Relations'

In the 1990s, the focal point when looking at China-India relations was the border dispute. This major ongoing bone of contention in China-India relations had been 'generally peaceful' since Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in 1988, with the deliberations and dialogue in the Joint working Group (JWG) resulting in an overall 'steady improvement in India-China relations'.¹⁵ However, despite the progress and the recent détente in India-China relations, sensitive questions on the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and Sikkim were left unaddressed during the 1996 meeting.

In May 1998, India-China relations hit a temporary low when the contents of Prime Minister Vajpayee's letter to American President Bill Clinton—in which China was named as the justification for India's nuclear test (Pokhran-II)—leaked out. In the letter, Prime Minister Vajpayee stated that '[a]lthough our relations with that country have improved in the last decade or so, an atmosphere of distrust persists mainly due to the unresolved border problem'.¹⁶ The leaked letter gave a peek inside Indian official thinking on China even as it could also be seen as a justification of India to go nuclear. New Delhi had to convincingly argue why it needed a nuclear stockpile despite burgeoning international non-proliferation regimes. Pakistan was not a declared nuclear power state yet, and so China was the only reference Indian policymakers could use to justify the necessity of nuclear weapons for India's nuclear deterrence capability. In this sense, it is difficult to determine to what extent a real change in perception took place in May 1998.

What is notable, however, is that the harsh talk on China quickly softened. In a testimony to the Rajya Sabha (the Indian Upper House), Prime Minister Vajpayee said that India

would like the Chinese side to appreciate that our concerns need to be addressed in a meaningful manner with a view to finding early

¹⁵ Ministry of External Affairs, *Annual Report 1996-1997*, New Delhi: Government of India, 1997, p. 4.

¹⁶ 'PM's reply to the Discussion in the Rajya Sabha on Nuclear Tests' in *Strategic Digest*, New Delhi: IDSA, 1998, p. 1585.

resolution . . . On the boundary question, we recognize that a resolution takes time and patience. But progress can, and should, be made . . . we do not seek a confrontation with China . . . We remain committed to the process of dialogue to resolve outstanding differences and to the development of friendly, cooperative, good neighbourly and a mutually beneficial relationship with China.¹⁷

On August 4 of the same year, in a statement at the Lok Sabha (the Indian Lower House), Prime Minister Vajpayee reaffirmed that India did not see China as an enemy or a threat.¹⁸ In the same year (1998), National Security Adviser (NSA) Brajesh Mishra and President Narayanan, in line with PM Vajpayee's remarks, publicly stated that India does not see China as a security threat. Similar statements followed after the visit to China by the Indian Foreign Minister Singh in 1999.

The JWG meetings were postponed by the Chinese in 1998. However, the India-China Expert Group—a sub-group of the JWG consisting of military and diplomatic officials—met on 8 and 9 June 1998, within a month of the nuclear test.¹⁹ From the Indian side, there was a political will to minimize the effect of the nuclear testing on the process of the border talks. As early as 1996/97, it was acknowledged by the Indian side that, in the JWG deliberations, it was 'necessary to accelerate the process of clarification of the alignment of the entire LAC, including through an exchange of maps'.²⁰ There was a sense from the Indian side that the Chinese were not willing to move forward on the border issue, and that talks would not be able to produce significant outcomes for a long period

¹⁷ Atal Behari Vajpayee, 'Reply made by Atal Behari Vajpayee, the Prime Minister, on 29 May 1998 in the Rajya Sabha on Nuclear Tests in Pokhran', in K. R. Gupta (ed.) *Selected Documents on Nuclear Disarmament*, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001, p. 238.

¹⁸ Li Li, *Security Perception and China India Relations*, New Delhi: Knowledge World International, 2008.

¹⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, *Annual Report 1998-1999*, New Delhi: Government of India, 1999, p. 31.

²⁰ Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 1996-1997*, New Delhi: Government of India, 1997, p. 11.

of time, despite the growing number of consultative and dialogue bodies.²¹ Such arguments were also made by the Chinese side and, despite the growing number of consultative bodies that addressed the border issue, there was very little actual progress.

In 2000, in its official documents, India declared that a 'difference in perception' continued to exist between the Chinese and the Indian sides over the actual line of the LAC, causing what each side considered intrusions by the other. This resulted in situations 'on the ground that could have been avoided had the LAC clarification been completed'.²² It also stated that while China was preoccupied with other issues, internally as well as on its maritime borders, China's policy towards the border issue with India would not be to resolve the issue, but to 'keep differences within manageable limits'.²³ In official publications, India repeatedly reaffirmed the importance of dialogue and consultations, but also showed its desire to speed up the process of clarification and eventual resolution. Despite these shared perceptions of a lack of political will from the other side to move forward on the border issue, India and China were quick to restart high-level visits and negotiations after Pokhran-II.

In 2000, JWG discussions resumed, and in 2001, a small breakthrough was achieved when both sides agreed to exchange maps on the central part of the middle sector of the LAC. During a visit to China in 2002, Foreign Minister Jashwant Singh stated that there was further progress in the talks, as both sides agreed to exchange sample maps of the Western and Eastern Sector of the LAC by the end of 2003. He summarized that the 'establishment of a comprehensive security dialogue shows that the efforts of the last four years or so [has been] to put India-China relations on a certain fixed and predictable rail on a monthly pace'.²⁴ In a press

²¹ Shruti Pandalai, 'Enduring Legacy of 1962: Cementing the Conflict of Perceptions in Sino-Indian Ties', *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2012, pp. 207-228.

²² Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2000-2001*, New Delhi: Government of India, 2001, p. 3.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ 'Transcript of Press Briefing by External Affairs Minister Shri Jaswant Singh at Diaoyutai Guest House' *Strategic Digest*, New Delhi: IDSA, 2002, p. 595.

conference at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, Singh was asked whether the boundary question should be resolved through talks, and if a resolution of the issue was possible. His reaction was quite clear: 'Yes, it is not just possible, it must be resolved. We must not permit the shadows of the past to affect the relations of the future'.²⁵ It seemed the Pokhran-II missile test had done little more than temporarily stall the ongoing process of finding a resolution on the border.

During Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to China in 2003, in a speech at Peking University, he asserted that India and China had suffered from a time when both went through an introspective phase but that, in the last few decades, both countries had taken steps to increase trust and understanding. He added that there were elements of competition between the two countries, but that such competition was natural, and no reason for divisive rivalry. First and foremost, Prime Minister Vajpayee emphasized the importance of resolving the border issue for the further development China-India relations. He stated that '[o]ne cannot wish away the fact that before good neighbours can truly fraternize with each other, they must first mend their fences'.²⁶ Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal expressed a similar line of reasoning when, at the Geneva Forum in early 2003, he stated that the challenge with China is 'to sustain the steady expansion and strengthening of the relationship in diverse fields even as we attempt to together resolve the border issue'.²⁷

In order to resolve the outstanding issue, Prime Minister Vajpayee stressed that India would have to adopt a pragmatic stance. His visit has been seen a breakthrough in India-China relations, and not only because of the rhetoric: India and China signed a Declaration on Principles for Relations and Comprehensive Cooperation; assigned Special Representatives to deal with

²⁵ Ibid., pp.601.

²⁶ Atal Bihari Vajpayee 'Speech by Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee at Peking University', in Mahendra Gaur (ed.), *Foreign Policy Annual 2004*, Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2005, p. 179.

²⁷ Kanwal Sibal, 'Indian Foreign Policy: Challenges and Prospects', in Arvind Gupta, Makul Chaturvedi and Ashavy Joshi (eds.) *Security and Diplomacy: Essential Documents*, New Delhi: Manas Publications, 2004, p. 272.

the border issue from a political perspective; and signed a trade agreement allowing border trade at a market in Sikkim (Changgu). At that time, China was the only country that did not recognize Sikkim as an Indian state. Two years later, in a joint statement, China recognized that Sikkim was a state within the Republic of India, effectively ending a dispute that existed since the 1970s. Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit was important because it reaffirmed the growing economic and political links and convergence between the two countries, while also creating a momentum for substantial progress on the border issue.

In 2005, both sides set the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles to seek a settlement on the border—another step in attempts to come to concrete results. A little bit later in that same year, as described above, India and the USA signed an agreement on nuclear cooperation. The increased closeness of India and the USA had a negative spill-over effect on the border issue. After the India-US nuclear agreement was signed, the Chinese stance on the border issue hardened. Evidence for this is seen in the hardening of the Chinese position on Arunachal Pradesh; the increased number of Chinese incursions along the border; strong Chinese reactions to Prime Minister Singh's visit to Arunachal Pradesh and to President Prathiba Patil's visit to Tawang; objections from the Chinese for a loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for projects on the disputed border; and the Chinese refusal to grant visas to Indian government officials from Arunachal Pradesh. Defense Minister Mukherjee raised the ante, saying that the 'situation has not improved. Massive preparations and deployments by China in the Tibetan and Sikkim border areas near Arunachal Pradesh and the Aksai Chin . . . have created an alarming situation'.²⁸ One explanation by Indian scholars for this hardening stance on the border issue is that India's increased closeness with the USA was perceived in Beijing as a matter of external balancing against China.²⁹

²⁸ Pranab Mukherjee, as quoted in Donald L. Berlin 'India in the Indian Ocean' in *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 59, No. 2, Spring 2006, p. 63.

²⁹ Prashant Kumar Singh and Rumel Dahiya, 'Managing India-China Relations' in Rumel Dahiya and Ashok K. Behuria (eds.) *India's Neighbourhood, Challenges in the Next Two Decades*, New Delhi: IDSA, 2012. See also, Namrata Goswami, 'China's Territorial Claim on India's Arunachal Pradesh: A Response to Changing Power Dynamics in Asia', in *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 35, No. 5, September 2011, pp. 781-792.

As a result, public statements from Indian policymakers have undergone significant change as well. Whereas Vajpayee pressed for the need to look for pragmatic solutions to resolve the border issue, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh remained more vague and open-ended when talking about the border issue. Like his predecessor, he emphasized the importance of cooperative relations with China in general, and the significance of the border talks. In contrast to Prime Minister Vajpayee, Singh said he was 'satisfied with the results of our efforts so far, and [we] are convinced that the potential for India-China relations is great and will be realized'.³⁰ Defence Minister Mukherjee voiced similar words upon returning from China in 2006. He stated that 'the possibility of an armed conflict with China had receded, thanks to several Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) being implemented by both the countries to improve defence relations and eliminate tension on the border'. He later summarized the bilateral relations as follows: 'neither do we consider them a threat to us, nor do they consider us a threat to them. There is enough space for both to grow in their own areas'.³¹

From the Indian side, there were fewer mentions in official documents about the need for a quick resolution of the issue—let alone mention of taking a pragmatic stand on the subject. Although both sides still aim for a resolution of the matter in the long term, the consensus has changed in that both sides acknowledge the process will take considerable time, and that both should focus first and foremost on maintaining peace and stability on the border at a time of geopolitical shifts and de-escalation, should crises occur. Das argues that, recently, border talks have transformed from a consultation mechanism to *resolve* the outstanding issue to a consultations body to *manage* it, thus effectively accepting the current status quo for the time being.³²

³⁰ Press Information Bureau, *PM addresses the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, New Delhi: Government of India, 15 January 2008. Available at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=34609> Accessed April 6, 2014.

³¹ Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee, in a Press Conference after his return from the tour of China and Japan' in Avtar Singh Bhasin (ed.) *India's Foreign Relations" 2006*, New Delhi: Geetika Publishers, 2007, p. 933.

³² Rup Narayan Das, 'India-China Border Talks Shift from Resolving Disputes to Managing Them' *China Brief*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 2014. Available at <http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/> Accessed 12 March 2014.

One growing apprehension from the Indian side has been China's infrastructure development on its side of the contested border. Indian concerns on this were clearly articulated in the Annual Report of 2008 when, in a separate chapter on the LAC, it stated that the Indian army would 'continue to realistically analyse the growing economic and military capacities of China and the infrastructural developments in TAR. Accordingly, we are constantly reviewing and upgrading our strategic and conventional postures, so that our national security is not compromised'³³ The 2010 Report added that China's military modernization and its infrastructure development in the TAR and Xinjiang province 'considerably upgraded China's military force projection capability and strategic operational flexibility'.³⁴ As a response, India is investing in infrastructure on its own side of the border area at the same time as it is increasing its conventional standing force with two extra divisions, as was approved by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) in 2008.

China's has also stepped up its presence in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK), where, after the earthquake of 2005, Chinese construction and telecommunication companies were involved in restoration and rehabilitation efforts. It was speculated that the Chinese presence was not only to help Pakistan in the recovery of the earthquake, but also to create a 'strategic corridor' by laying rails, roads and oil pipes, and linking Xinjiang province with Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea. It was reported that, in order to support the reconstruction efforts and secure the safe delivery of oil, Beijing was planning to open military bases in Gilgit-Baltistan—a region under dispute, and considered by the Indians to be a part of the Indian province of Jammu and Kashmir.³⁵ Although such media reports turned out to be inaccurate, China's increased presence in the disputed area ramped

³³ Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2007-2008*, New Delhi: Government of India, 2008, p. 23.

³⁴ Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2009-2010*, New Delhi: Government of India, 2010, p. 26.

³⁵ Bidanda Chengappa, 'Why China is setting up military bases in PoK,' *DNA India*, 15 November 2011. Available at <http://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/comment-why-china-is-setting-up-military-bases-in-pok-1612612> Accessed on 22 March 2014.

up trepidations in New Delhi, in particular since the engineer troops were—according to Army Chief Singh—a ‘part of the PLA’.³⁶ One of the main concerns with the Indian army was how China would react in the hypothetical case of hostilities between Pakistan and India in PoK. When asked about the presence of Chinese troops in PoK, External Affairs Minister Krishna replied that the government ‘closely and regularly monitors all developments along our borders, which can have a bearing on our security’.³⁷ Defence Minister Antony went a step further, saying the Chinese presence is a concern and asked Beijing to cease its activities in PoK.³⁸

Such arguments did not persuade Beijing. Instead, China argued that the development of the economic corridor from Gwadar to Xinjiang Province through PoK could bring stability and economic development to the region. At an address at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), Foreign Secretary Rao summed up the sensitive features of the China-Pakistan relationship: (i) China’s role in Pakistan occupied Kashmir; (ii) China’s Jammu and Kashmir policy; and (iii) the China-Pakistan security and nuclear relationship.³⁹ Infrastructure projects close to India’s contested borders add to fears of a Chinese encirclement of India, as widely reported in media and commentaries. In a more moderate tone, South Block has started to articulate its concerns over it in recent years, and has pledged to invest more heavily in infrastructure projects on its own side of the border.

³⁶ ‘Chinese troops in Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir: Gen V.K. Singh’ *The Economic Times*, 6 October 2011. Available at http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2011-10-06/news/30250574_1_chinese-presence-chinese-troops-pok Accessed 15 March 2014.

³⁷ ‘Response of External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna to questions on reports of the presence of foreign troops in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir’, in Avtar Singh Bhasin (ed.) *India’s Foreign Relations”2011*, New Delhi: Geetika Publishers, 2011, p. 846.

³⁸ ‘India asks China to cease activities in Pakistan occupied Kashmir’, *The Indian Express*, 3 September 2012, Available at <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/india-asks-china-to-cess-activities-in-pakistan-occupied-kashmir/997108/> Accessed 15 March 2014.

³⁹ Nirupama Rao, ‘India-China relations’, in Avtar Singh Bhasin (ed.) *India’s Foreign Relations”2010*, New Delhi: Geetika Publishers, 2011, p. 1065.

The discourse on the border has gone through three distinctive phases. The years until 1998 were marked by progress in the form of important CBMs and mutual recognition of the perceptions of both parties regarding the border. The Vajpayee government (1998-2004), stressed a pragmatic approach to the border and focused on the need to resolve the issue in order to move India-China relations forward. The Manmohan Singh government emphasized the difficulty in resolving the border issue, while stressing the many new dimensions and positive developments in the India-China relationship. In the words of Foreign Secretary Rao:

I believe there is maturity on both sides to understand the complexity of the issue and to insulate it from affecting our broader relationship. I believe this policy has paid dividends and has contributed towards reducing the possibility of conflict.⁴⁰

According to this line of reasoning, the border does not dictate the state of India-China relations as much as it has in the past. However, the overall condition of India-China relations does affect the positions of each side on the border issue. In a way, the border has become a thermometer to measure the state of the overall bilateral relationship. In other words, the issue of the border does not stand on its own anymore, but is invoked and affected by shifts in the overall India-China relationship.

China's Nuclear Proliferation: 'the need for a credible deterrent capability'

Despite the upward trend in China-India relations, and their simultaneous rise in power in the early and mid-1990s, one obvious asymmetry in their bilateral strategic relations continued to exist: China's possession of a nuclear weapon. In 1964, China exploded a nuclear device and, from then onwards, started upgrading and modernizing its nuclear capabilities and delivery systems. This became an ongoing concern for Indian policymakers. Halfway during the 1990s, the Annual Report of the Indian Ministry of Defence stated that, given the continuing proliferation 'of nuclear weapons and missiles in our neighbourhood, adequate defensive measures are inescapable,

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 989.

much as India may have wished otherwise.⁴¹ At the same time, the indefinite extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1995 divided the world in the 'nuclear haves' and 'nuclear have-nots'. In India's view, the extension of the NPT 'has legitimized a major weapon of mass destruction and has allowed a few countries total monopoly over it.'⁴² The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), aiming to restrict the testing of nuclear devices, added further restrictions to nuclear aspirant powers such as India. In the mid-1990s, non-proliferation regimes, practices and norms became more widely accepted and embraced by the international community.

In the Indian perspective, these developments put global pressure on the country to develop its own nuclear option and missile programs. In May 1998, India successfully completed a series of nuclear tests, thus joining the nuclear possession states *de facto*. The arguments justifying the need for a nuclear weapon were in line with expressions in earlier official publications: there were nuclear power states in India's neighbourhood and its going nuclear could actually restore the balance and have a stabilizing effect.⁴³ It was a leaked letter of Prime Minister Vajpayee that openly singled out China as the reason behind India's quest to go nuclear. It stated that,

I have been deeply concerned at the deteriorating security environment, especially the nuclear environment, faced by India for some years past. We have an overt nuclear weapon state on our borders, a state which committed armed aggression against India in 1962.⁴⁴

China's missile development had been a concern in Indian defence circles for quite some time. In the 1970s, there were repeated calls of China

⁴¹ Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 1995-1996*, New Delhi: Government of India, 1996, p. 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴³ Yashwant Singh, 'India's Foreign Policy in the New Millennium', in *Strategic Digest*, New Delhi: IDSA, 2002, p. 1243.

⁴⁴ 'Nuclear anxiety: Indian's letter to Clinton on the nuclear testing' *New York Times*, 13 May 1998. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/13/world/nuclear-anxiety-indian-s-letter-to-clinton-on-the-nuclear-testing.html> Accessed March 7, 2014.

targeting India through the deployment of missiles in the TAR, although these allegations have been systematically denied by the Chinese. And even though the possibility that China would use nuclear weapons against India—or in the border areas—seemed remote, there was a feeling within Indian defence circles that this asymmetric relationship could be exploited by the Chinese to put certain strategic pressure on India.⁴⁵ National Security Advisor (NSA) Shivshankar Menon mentioned that before its nuclear tests in 1998, India faced implicit or explicit nuclear threats from other powers on at least three occasions.⁴⁶

After the successful nuclear test in 1998, the National Security Advisory Board, a group of non-governmental independent security experts, was asked to come up with a draft nuclear doctrine. The draft was published fourteen months later, in 1999. It was supposed to be a subject for public debate amongst policymakers and experts, and was to serve as input for the official doctrine. The official nuclear doctrine was accepted by the Indian cabinet in 2003. Although it was not made public, the Indian government stated that, in line with the draft doctrine, India would pursue: a minimum credible deterrent; a no-first-use policy; and non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states. One important change between the draft doctrine and the doctrine as accepted by the CCS was how India is to react against a nuclear first strike. In the draft doctrine, it was stated that 'any nuclear attack on India and its armed forces shall result in punitive retaliation with nuclear weapons to inflict damage unacceptable to the aggressor'.⁴⁷ The officially accepted doctrine of 2003 specified that 'nuclear retaliation to a first strike will be massive and designed

⁴⁵ Sisir Gupta, 'The Indian Dilemma', in Alastair Buchan (ed.) *A World of Nuclear Powers?* Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966.

⁴⁶ 'Nukes have deterred world powers from threatening India: Menon' *The Hindu*, 22 August 2012. Available at <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-in-school/nukes-have-deterred-world-powers-from-threatening-india-menon/article3805220.ece> Accessed 12 February 2014.

⁴⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, 'Draft Report of National Security Advisory Board on Indian Nuclear Doctrine,' New Delhi: Government of India, 17 August 1999. Available at <http://www.mea.gov.in/in-focus-article.htm?18916/Draft+Report+of+National+Security+Advisory+Board+on+Indian+Nuclear+Doctrine> Accessed 9 March 2014.

to inflict unacceptable damage'.⁴⁸ This change has had an effect on the credibility of using nuclear weapons against a tactical or limited strike, in particular in the border areas.⁴⁹ China is the only other country, besides India, that upholds the principle of no-first use. However, some in the Indian strategic community have pointed out that it is unclear to what extent this norm applies to the disputed border. The change in the content by the Indian government of the nuclear doctrine could be explained by (i) the lack of strategic thinking on nuclear issues at the governmental level, or (ii) by the lack of concern over the possibility of the use of (tactical) nuclear weapons in the disputed border.⁵⁰

India's quest for a nuclear weapon has been attributed to other factors besides security concerns alone.⁵¹ Nonetheless, official discourse repeatedly singled out India's 'regional' security concerns and the fact that India needed a nuclear weapon in order to restore the military balance. The successful nuclear test did not dampen its nuclear apprehensions. China's nuclear proliferation remained a source of concern. The Annual Report of 1999 stated that '[t]he presence of Chinese SSBNs in the Indian Ocean may soon be a reality'.⁵² In the years following Pokhran-II, India still felt exposed

⁴⁸ Prime Minister's Office, 'Cabinet committee on security reviews progress in operationalizing India's nuclear doctrine' New Delhi: Government of India, 4 January 2003. Available at <http://pib.nic.in/archieve/lreleng/lyr2003/rjan2003/04012003/r040120033.html> Accessed 9 March 2014.

⁴⁹ Bharat Karnad, research professor at the Centre for Policy Research, interview by author, 24 February 2014.

⁵⁰ Srikanth Kondapalli, professor School of International Relations, Jawaharlal Nehru University, interview by author, 14 March 2014.

⁵¹ See, for instance, Priyanjali Malik, *India's Nuclear Debate: Exceptionalism and the Bomb*, Routledge: New Delhi, 2010 for an analysis of international pressure on India. See also, Karsten Frey, *India's Nuclear Bomb and National Security*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2006 on the status, prestige and India's struggle for international recognition; and Jacques E. C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions and Foreign Policy*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006 on state leaders' conceptions of national identity and their decision to pursue nuclear weapons.

⁵² Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 1998-1999*, New Delhi: Government of India, 1999, p. 5.

to China's nuclear arsenal, in particular around the turn into the 21st century when it still had little defense against potential nuclear attacks, and little retaliation capabilities. The 2000 Ministry of Defence Annual Report states that

[e]very major Indian city is within reach of Chinese missiles and it is reported that this capability is further augmented to include Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs). The asymmetry in terms of nuclear forces is strongly in favor of China.⁵³

The reality was that China's sole nuclear (Xia-class) submarine was hardly operational, and had never left China's coastal waters. Nonetheless, China's naval development (including its nuclear submarine component) was in full swing, and added to a decades-old Indian feeling of susceptibility to potential nuclear attacks and psychological pressure from a nuclear-capable China. The first Indian Maritime Doctrine of 2004 argued that strategic nuclear capabilities were vital in order for India to adopt a truly independent foreign policy. It felt that, compared to the other great powers 'India stands out alone as being devoid of a credible nuclear triad'.⁵⁴ The doctrine called for a submarine-based nuclear deterrent to strengthen India's second strike capability. In 2009, India launched its first ballistic nuclear submarine, the *INS Arihant*, which can carry K-15 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) with a range up to 750 kilometers, or 4 K-4 SLBM (under development) with a range of 3500 kilometers. The Indian Navy expects the *INS Arihant* to be commissioned in 2015, with 3 more similar submarines planned to enter service before 2023, which would result in a capable sea-based nuclear deterrent.

India has also been developing and upgrading its missile delivery systems, with the Agni II intermediate range ballistic missile (IRBM) becoming operational in 2001. According to the Indian government, the delivery of the Agni II meant that 'India can hold its head high without fear of being bullied in a hostile security environment'. It goes on to say that the

⁵³ Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2000-2001*, New Delhi: Government of India, 2001, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence, INBR 8, *Indian Maritime Doctrine*, New Delhi: Indian Navy, 2004.

development of the missile was not Pakistan-centric, but that the new Agni was instead 'at the heart of deterrence in the larger context of the Sino-Indian equation'.⁵⁵ The development of delivery systems continued, with the Agni III successfully being tested in 2007. With a range of 3500-5000 kilometers, it would be able to hit high-value targets deep in China's mainland, including Shanghai. In the meantime, China conducted an anti-satellite test (ASAT) in 2007, making Indian policymakers and the defense establishment once again aware of its vulnerability to Chinese military developments (this time in outer space). Prime Minister Singh initially said that India's position 'is not in favor of the weaponization of space'.⁵⁶ The Chairman of India's Space Research Organization, Madhavar Nair, condoned China for testing such weapons against international conventions, and stressed that India would not follow suit because of its principle to use space only for peaceful purposes.⁵⁷ On his part, Air Chief Marshal Shashi Tyagi argued that India *should* pursue its own aerospace command, and invest in space warfare.⁵⁸ Whereas both of the former high-ranking officials might be advancing their own parochial interests, Foreign Minister Mukherjee took a more ambiguous approach and stated that, while still upholding India's principle on the peaceful use of outer space, 'recent developments show that we are treading a thin line between current defense related uses of space and its actual weaponization'.⁵⁹

The ASAT test was new evidence that China was becoming more confident with its increased power or, as Pranab Mukherjee said, more 'assertive' in its foreign policy. According to him, India's response should reflect this

⁵⁵ Information Bureau, *Testing Agni-II*, New Delhi: Government of India, 23 April 1999. Available at <http://pib.nic.in/feature/fe0499/f2304991.html> Accessed 21 March 2014.

⁵⁶ Manmohan Singh, as quoted in Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, Arvind K. John, *A New Frontier: Boosting India's Military Presence in Outer Space*, Observer Research Foundation Occasional Paper #50, New Delhi: 2014, p. 15.

⁵⁷ Joseph E. Lin, 'Regional reactions to ASAT Missile Test & China's Renewed Activities in the East China Sea', *China Brief*, Vol. 7, No. 3, October 2007.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Pranab Mukherjee, 'Aerospace Power in tomorrow's world' *India's Foreign Relations"2007*, p. 156.

change in dealing with a 'new China'.⁶⁰ One obvious way for India to go, is to match the Chinese capabilities. Although there has not been a formal announcement about India pursuing its own ASAT capability, there have been ongoing developments in missile defence and delivery systems. The Agni V, successfully tested in 2012, has a range of over 5000 km, and will be able to strike at many high value targets deep in China. The missile is not yet ready for operational deployment. After the successful test of the Agni V, the Chief of the Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) Vijay Saraswat stated that '[t]oday we have developed all the building blocks for an anti-satellite (ASAT) capability'.⁶¹ He continued that India is not planning on testing its ASAT capabilities in outer space but is, instead, relying on simulations. India has also been investing in its nuclear-capable fighter aircraft, adding modern SU-40 MKIs and Mig-29Ks to an already nuclear capable fleet of Mirage 2000Hs, Jaguar IS/IBs and indigenously build TAL Helas. The government has an order for 126 more Rafale fighter-bombers. India has also started to develop its own ballistic missile defence system—initially as a response to Pakistan's comments during the Kargil War but could also serve as a defence against China's growing Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) capabilities. However, the operational state of the ballistic missile defence system remains unclear, with conflicting statements coming from the DRDO about the actual deployment of the system.

China's nuclear proliferation is an even bigger issue because of its nuclear cooperation and weapons transfers with Pakistan. Beijing allied itself with Islamabad after the 1962 war with India in order to (i) contain India, and (ii) maintain its influence in the South Asian subcontinent. The paradox is that China-Pakistan military cooperation continued even while India and China were on a path of restoring their frayed relations. Subsequent reports suggested that Beijing supplied the components of nuclear-capable M11-

⁶⁰ Pranab Mukherjee, 'India's Security Challenges and Foreign Policy Imperatives', in Avtar Singh Bhasin (ed.) *India's Foreign Relations"2008*, New Delhi: Geetika Publishers, 2009, pp. 244.

⁶¹ Vijay Saraswat, as quoted in Sandeep Unnithan, 'India takes on China' *India Today*, 28 April 2012. Available at <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/> Accessed 20 March 2014.

missiles to Pakistan even after it joined the NPT in 1992. Chinese assistance to the Pakistan nuclear program is an incessant source of concern, and a rationale for India to continue its own indigenous nuclear program. Or, as the Annual Report stated 'the indigenous development of missile capability by India is in response to the evolving security environment in its region'.⁶² When Pakistan tested the Ghauri missile in 1998, Defence Minister Fernandes declared that 'China is the mother of this missile'.⁶³

China's continued assistance in missile and nuclear technology to Pakistan does not only impinge directly on the national security of India, but also raises the question of what China's strategic intentions truly are. In discussing whether China would be a factor for stability in Asia, the Indian National Security Advisor Mishra stated that '[China's] profile in military alliances and its commitment to existing nuclear and missile technology transfer regimes would be important indicators of the direction that its role would take in this venture'.⁶⁴ On many occasions, Indian policymakers asked China to show greater sensitivity to India's concerns, and reconsider its military supports to Pakistan.⁶⁵ The Chinese reaction to such requests was that China-Pakistan cooperation was well within the international norms and rules, and that the cooperation was not aimed at a third country. On the other hand, China is seen to as becoming more cautious in its approach to Pakistan. Beijing does not want its relations with Islamabad to upset the process of normalization between India and China. Beijing remained neutral in the 1999 Kargil conflict, and stressed that the problem should be resolved bilaterally in accordance with the Simla-Agreement of 1972—a stance which was similar to India's position. Even so, China's enduring

⁶² Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 1996-1997*, New Delhi: Government of India, 1997, p. 2.

⁶³ As quoted in Ashley Tellis, *India's Emerging Nuclear Posture: Between Recessed Deterrent and Ready Arsenal*, Santa Monica: RAND, 2001, p. 49.

⁶⁴ Presentation by Mr. Brajesh Mishra, National Security Adviser, Government of India on India and the Stability of the Asian Continent at Institute Francaise des Relations Internationale, Paris, in Mahendra Gaur (ed.) *Foreign Policy Annual 2002*, New Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2002, p. 39.

⁶⁵ Tien-sze Fang, *Asymmetrical Threat Perceptions in India-China relations*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014.

friendship with Pakistan has been seen by Indian experts as a strategic calculus by China to keep India bogged down in South Asia.⁶⁶ The official discourse does not deliberate on the strategic rationale of China's engagement with Pakistan. What Indian policymakers *do* ask repeatedly is more understanding from the Chinese side when it comes to Indian concerns regarding the proliferation aspects of the China-Pakistan relationship.

It was partly as a reaction to growing Chinese influence in the region that New Delhi and Washington decided to revamp their bilateral relations in 2005. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President George Bush agreed on a framework for cooperation between India and the USA on civil nuclear power. Critics, including the Chinese government, argued that the agreement was destabilizing to the non-proliferation regime since India was not a signatory of the NPT. The nuclear agreement between India and the USA only deals with civilian nuclear cooperation. Nonetheless, Indian policymakers found themselves in a difficult position to show to the world India's commitment to nuclear disarmament and at the same time justify its need for nuclear weapons. In the official discourse, arguments were pointed towards the security situation in India's direct neighbourhood, as well as references to past aggression suffered by India. Both served the purpose—once again—of explaining New Delhi's position. Against the backdrop of the India-US Nuclear Agreement, Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh invoked arguments similar to the ones uttered after India conducted its nuclear tests in 1998. The former said that 'India is faced with an unfavourable nuclear and missile environment', partly due to the 'two declared weapon states with whom we have had a history of aggression and conflict'.⁶⁷

Prime Minister Singh was more opaque in his statement: he did not make any specific references to China, but his message was quite clear: 'We have, of course, security concerns, international security concerns. Nuclear

⁶⁶ Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu and Jing-Dong Yuan, *China and India, Cooperation or Conflict?*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003.

⁶⁷ Pranab Mukherjee, Address at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in *Strategic Digest*, New Delhi: IDSA, 2002, p. 858.

proliferation in our neighbourhood is something that worries us . . . In this uncertain world, the unpredictable world that we live in, we have legitimate security concerns'.⁶⁸ In short, the arguments were largely similar to the public statements that followed the Pokhran-II tests. Apparently, New Delhi did not deem it necessary to reassure Beijing. This shows that apprehensions over Chinese nuclear development and proliferation have been apparent and constant in India's official discourse. Indian leaders have used the nuclear asymmetry as a justification to go nuclear itself, and have continuously made references to concerns related to nuclear proliferation in the region.

Stephen P. Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta note that strategists in India are well aware of the need for India to acquire a credible second strike capability.⁶⁹ The authors argue that India feels secure that its nuclear weapons pose a credible deterrent against Pakistan. In the case of China, however, Indian strategists are less certain about the credibility of India's deterrence capabilities. They suggest that new missiles that could strike deep into China's mainland (Agni V, Agni VI), a sea-borne nuclear capability (with long-range SLBMs), and the introduction of tactical nuclear weapons along the Himalaya's—either in the Aksai Chin or the Ladakh Area—could significantly enhance India's nuclear posture. Despite internal and external balancing efforts, India's nuclear capabilities and delivery systems still lag behind those of China. Chinese missiles in the TAR; China's test firing of new arms (DF-31, DF-41); the possibilities of a Chinese nuclear-armed submarine in the Indian Ocean; and the 2007 anti-satellite test have made India aware, time and again, of its nuclear vulnerability vis-à-vis China.

Although India maintains that it works towards a nuclear-free world, the concerns over the proliferation of nuclear weapons continue to be ubiquitous. In 2012, Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai acknowledged India's historical struggle with nuclear proliferation: 'We have for long recognized

⁶⁸ Manmohan Singh, Statement of PM in Rajya Sabha on the India-US Nuclear Agreement, New Delhi: 17 August 2006. Available at <http://pmindia.gov.in/speech-details.php?nodeid=355>.

⁶⁹ Stephen P. Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming without Aiming: India's Military Modernization*, Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2010.

the challenge the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery poses for our national security and world order'.⁷⁰ As long as proliferation in its neighbourhood continues, and India lacks a credible and secure second strike capability, such sentiments are not likely to dissipate.

China's Maritime Ambitions: 'Competition in the IOR'

In 1992, India officially initiated its Look East policy—a deliberate attempt to bring India closer to economically dynamic Southeast Asia. Four years later, India became a full dialogue member of ASEAN and a member in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). These developments formalized and institutionalized India's Look East policy. The Ministry of Defence Annual Report of 1997/1998 stated that when it comes to India's security interests beyond the Indian Ocean Region, Indian's new broader security horizon includes 'countries of ASEAN, Central Asia, the Gulf regions, and the Indian Ocean community'.⁷¹ For India it meant a 'redefinition of [its] neighbourhood as [it] draw closer to [its] dynamic South East Asian neighbours'.⁷² At the same time, China had been extending its strategic maritime horizons by looking beyond the first and second island chain to Southeast Asia, and into the Indian Ocean. As both rising powers looked beyond their maritime boundary lines, it was only a matter of time for India and China to encounter each other at sea. India's Look East Policy and its rapprochement with Southeast Asia brought it closer to witnessing firsthand the effects of China's growing naval prowess.

Under the BJP-led government, India expanded its strategic horizons further. The 'extended neighbourhood' concept was meant to look beyond

⁷⁰ Ranjan Mathai 'Keynote Address by Foreign Secretary Shri Ranjan Mathai at the Ministry of External Affairs– Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) National Export Control Seminar' 12 April 2012. Available at <http://idsa.in/keyspeeches/AddressbyForeignSecretaryShriRanjanMathai> Accessed 11 April 2014.

⁷¹ Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 1997-1998*, p. 2.

⁷² 'Statement by Shri Pranab Mukhertjee, Minister for External Affairs, on the Implications of India becoming a full Dialogue Partner of ASEAN,' in *Foreign Affairs Record 1996*, New Delhi: MEA, 1 February 1996, p. 29.

South-Asia towards the east, west, and the south. In 2004, Prime Minister Singh talked of how India's

strategic footprint covers the region bounded by the Horn of Africa, West Asia, Central Asia, South-East Asia and beyond, to the far reaches of the Indian Ocean. Awareness of this reality should inform and animate our strategic thinking and defense planning'.⁷³

The Indian Navy presented its own perspective in the Maritime Doctrine of 2004, where it spoke of 'the shift in global maritime focus from the Atlantic-Pacific combine to the Pacific-Indian Ocean Region'.⁷⁴ India's strategic footprint and its national interests went beyond the Indian Ocean horizon even before Prime Minister Abe's speech in the Indian Parliament in which he spoke of the confluence of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean—that is, anticipating the idea of the 'Indo-Pacific'. At the same time, there was an increased focus on the Indian Ocean itself, along with its growing strategic significance for Beijing and New Delhi. Throughout the last two decades, Beijing and New Delhi have become increasingly aware of the importance of energy security. The sea lines of communication from the Middle East to ports in India and China are vital lifelines that have to be secured in order to provide the growing energy appetite of the two economic giants and sustain economic growth. The Ministry of Defence Annual Report of 2009 states that India 'is crucially dependent on the sea because of the criticality of sea borne trade in an increasingly inter-linked world, as well as because of the potential of vast economic resources from the oceans'.⁷⁵

China's investments in naval capabilities have not been articulated as a source of concern in Indian official discourse very often. For a long time, India was hardly affected by China's naval modernization, as it was all

⁷³ Press Information Bureau, 'Combined Commander's Conference, Extracts from Prime Minister's Address', New Delhi: Government of India, 26 October 2004. Available at <http://www.pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=4535> Accessed 1 March 2014.

⁷⁴ Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence, *Maritime Doctrine* 2004, p. 34.

⁷⁵ Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2008-2009*, New Delhi: Government of India, 2009, p. 8.

happening in a distant theatre, far away from the Indian Ocean. The primary goals and ambitions of China's naval modernization had been confined within the geographical scope of Southeast and East Asia. The 1996/97 Annual Report stated that, for the first time,

the Asia-Pacific is beset with territorial and maritime disputes such as the South China Sea dispute, the Korean peninsula problem and the Kuriles Island dispute . . . [and these] may well serve as potential flashpoints, and can have a de-stabilizing effect on the economic growth and security of the entire region.⁷⁶

The report does not mention the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute, despite the growing Japanese-Chinese tensions in this particular year; nor does it make any reference to the Taiwan Straits Crisis. The main reasons for this were the positive developments in India-China relations during this time, and the 'One China' policy India adhered to.⁷⁷

It was Defence Minister Fernandes who first publicly voiced the concerns about China coming into the Indian Ocean. Commenting on the possible inroads of the Chinese navy into the Indian Ocean, Fernandes went on to state that China's

senior officials have said that the Indian Ocean is not India's ocean. There is no doubt in my mind that China's fast expanding navy, which will be the biggest navy in this part of the world, will be getting into the Indian Ocean fairly soon.⁷⁸

One reason for this was China's close relationship with the military junta in Myanmar. Myanmar is important for India for several reasons: (i) it borders India's North East states and, in that way, plays an essential part of India's Look East Policy; (ii) Myanmar has traditionally strong ties with China; and (iii) Myanmar is a hub for energy routes. The Ministry of Defence

⁷⁶ Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 1996-1997*, p. 3.

⁷⁷ Interview by author with senior government official.

⁷⁸ 'China is threat No. 1, says Fernandes', *Hindustan Times*, 3 May 1998. Available at <http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199805/msg00059.html> Accessed 16 February 2014.

Annual Report of 1997 stated that ‘China’s strengthening defence relations with Myanmar need to be carefully watched, in view of the geo-strategic location of Myanmar’.⁷⁹ The report does not give further details on the specifics of this growing sense of concern on the Indian side—other than pointing out that India’s security concerns in the subcontinent are ‘intimately linked to peace, progress, stability and security of Afghanistan, Myanmar and other neighbouring countries’.⁸⁰

A clear indication of China’s increased presence in Myanmar came in 1994 when the Indian coastguard intercepted and detained three trawlers, apparently fishing too close to the Indian naval base in the Andaman Islands while flying Myanmar flags. It appeared that the crew was all Chinese, and no fishing gear was found on board of the ship.⁸¹ It caused Defence Minister Fernandes to accuse China of helping Myanmar to install surveillance and communications equipment on some of the islands in the Bay of Bengal—including the Coco Islands—with the purpose of monitoring the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as well as activities along India’s east coast. Responding to these developments Fernandes stated that ‘there is massive electronic surveillance establishment which the Chinese have installed and which is monitoring everything in India. And there are moves to convert that into a major naval base which would be a direct threat to us’.⁸² These allegations later turned out to be inaccurate. Nonetheless, the statement was an example of the existing apprehensions in New Delhi on Chinese investments, the military cooperation with the military junta in Myanmar, and India’s sensitivities over China’s possible inroads into the Indian Ocean Region.

In 2001, the Indian government announced that

the growing strength of China and uncertainty over the future role of the USA in South East Asia had resulted in a regional arms race .

⁷⁹ Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 1996-1997*, p. 6.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Bertil Lintner, *Great Game East*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2012.

⁸² ‘India says china installing equipment in Myanmar,’ Reuters, 4 June 1998. Available at <http://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199806/msg00071.html> Accessed 11 March 2014.

. . [The] worsening of the security environment in South East Asia could affect regional stability, and will directly impinge on our interests.⁸³

In the same year, the Andaman and Nicobar Command was established, involving all the three services of the Indian armed forces, and aimed at securing India's strategic interests in South East Asia and the Strait of Malacca. India's desire for a greater maritime footprint also manifested itself in its outspoken desire for a blue water naval capability first mentioned in the Ministry of Defence Annual Report of 2002. In 2004, the Indian Navy published a maritime doctrine in which it stated that China's modernization programs, including the construction of an aircraft carrier, SSBNs, Type 093 attack submarines, conventional submarines, amphibious ships, and logistics ships 'would make the PLA Navy capable of projecting power well beyond China's shores'.⁸⁴ The doctrine also views 'the security environment in the neighbourhood surrounding the IOR as being far from satisfactory'. The increase of extra-regional powers in the Indian Ocean, and the growing influence of China have 'the potential of upsetting the strategic balance and adversely affecting the security of India'.⁸⁵

Thus, one of the Indian navy's missions was 'raising the cost of intervention by extra regional powers, and [deterring] them from acting against [India's] security interests'.⁸⁶ The doctrine boldly states that the 'control of the choke points could be useful as a bargaining chip in the international power game, where the currency of military power remains a stark reality'.⁸⁷ By 2005, Admiral Arun Prakash was raising the issue of China's 'determined drive to build a powerful blue water maritime force'; he also reiterated the 'imperative for India, therefore, to retain a strong maritime capability in order to maintain a balance of maritime power in the Indian Ocean, as

⁸³ Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2000-2001*, New Delhi: Government of India, 2001, p. 13.

⁸⁴ Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence, *Maritime Doctrine 2004*, p.70.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 54.

⁸⁶ As quoted in James R. Holmes, Andrew C. Winner and Toshi Yoshihara, *Indian Naval Strategy in the Twenty-first Century*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, p. 64.

⁸⁷ Integrated Headquarters, Ministry of Defence, *Indian Maritime Doctrine*, 2004

well as the larger Asia-Pacific region'.⁸⁸ Similar words were expressed in India's Maritime Military Strategy issue of 2007. In the document, the Chinese Navy was singled out as an extra-regional navy, set on a path of becoming a blue water force. Concerns over the development of China's navy are more frequently voiced by individual officers—especially after the 'chain of pearls' concept gained traction in the security discourse.

The Indian Ministry of Defence remained silent on the issue for a longer time. Strong statements on China by the Indian Navy were not in line with the discourse coming from South Block on how to deal with a growing China. The issue of Chinese-Indian rivalry in the IOR did not fit nicely into the wider official discourse that still emphasized cooperation, coordination and engagement. It was the 2009 Ministry of Defence Annual Report which explicitly stated, for the first time, that China is 'rapidly enhancing its blue-water navy to conduct operations in distant waters . . . [which] will have an effect on the overall military environment in the neighbourhood of India'⁸⁹—this was in line with changes in the overall discourse. This statement must be seen against the background of the People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN) first expeditionary deployment in the Gulf of Aden, and China's assertive behaviour in the South China Sea.

Keeping the sea-lanes of commerce open, securing its maritime interests in the region, and having the ability to project power in what India perceives to be its strategic footprint dictates that India should possess a strong blue water navy. The Ministry of Defence Annual Report acknowledged that '[t]he sea is increasingly becoming relevant in the context of India's security interests and we must re-adjust our military preparedness to this changing environment. We have in place an ambitious plan for force modernization of the Navy'.⁹⁰ Admiral Sureesh Mehta added that once China consolidates its comprehensive national power and has the military capabilities, it 'is likely to be more assertive on its claims, especially in its immediate neighbourhood'. When it comes to the Indian response, he said that 'our

⁸⁸ As quoted in David Scott's 'India's Drive for a Blue Water Navy' *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Winter 2007-08, p. 9.

⁸⁹ Ministry of Defence, *Annual Report 2009-2010*, p. 6.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

strategy to deal with China must include reducing the military gap and countering the Chinese footprint in the Indian Ocean Region'.⁹¹

Although India's official discourse had been relatively silent on China's naval modernization, the strategic importance of the Indian Navy in securing India's economic development and political influence in the region has become an increasingly important theme in official discourse in the last few years. In the words of Prime Minister Singh:

We should also recognize that there will be other competing interests whose maritime presence in the sphere of our interest and our influence will have to be carefully monitored. The importance of the Indian Navy in safeguarding our vital security interests has thus become paramount. There can, thus, be no doubt that the Indian Navy must be the most important maritime power in this region.⁹²

The increasing volume of Chinese trade and energy resources that travel through the Indian Ocean, combined with India's desire to continue to be the strongest maritime power in the region, could result in a security dilemma in which both states would want to defend their own national interests. As noted above, Indian discourse has shifted, and elements of competition are mentioned in particular when it comes to India-China interaction in the IOR. Foreign Minister Kurshid summarized:

we will have to accept the new reality of China's presence in many areas that we consider an exclusive playground for India and its friends. The games, the rules of the games will change. China will come in and add to the richness of the participation, but will also then provide greater competition.⁹³

⁹¹ Sureesh Mehta, 'India's National Security Challenges: An Armed Forces Overview', in Avtar Singh Bhasin (ed.) *India's Foreign Relations "2012*, New Delhi: Geetika Publishers, 2013, p. 219.

⁹² Manmohan Singh, 'Inaugural Address at the Naval Academy', in Avtar Singh Bhasin (ed.) *India's Foreign Relations"2009*, New Delhi: Geetika Publishers, 2010, p. 3.

⁹³ Salman Kurshid, 'The Dawning of the Asian Century: Emerging Challenges before Theory and Practices of International Relations in India', *India's Foreign Relations"2012*, p. 219.

Conclusion

From 1996 until 2012, the India-China relationship has developed in many directions. Nonetheless, many of the concerns that were first voiced in 1996 still echo in 2012: the border issue remains unresolved; China and Pakistan continue their cooperation on nuclear and missile technologies; and concerns of nuclear susceptibility will remain as long as India is not confident in having a credible deterrent against China. Adding to these ongoing concerns is China's infrastructure development in India's immediate neighbourhood, Beijing's growing political clout and economic footprint in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR); and with it, strategic competition over energy and resources. The scramble for resources in particular makes the relationship more competitive—also and zero-sum. Both countries link their economic development to a safe and steady supply of energy resources. The interruption of sea lanes would have grave consequences for either one. And, even though both acknowledge a shared concern for safe shipping and open sea lanes, the discourse tells us that China's inroads into the IOR are mostly cast in competitive and adversarial terms. India wants to remain the most important naval power in the IOR and a 'net provider' of security. This means that extra-regional navies, and in particular the Chinese, are under scrutiny. External Affairs Minister Krishna stated that India would remain 'conscious, always of the need to defend our security interests and to carefully monitor Chinese activities in our neighbourhood'.

When it comes to China's growing military capabilities, the concerns that stand out are China's proliferation of nuclear weapons and the China-Pakistan cooperation; both add to India's nuclear nervousness. India's investments in sea-, air- and land-based systems have reduced the asymmetry in nuclear capabilities to some extent and, with it, India's vulnerability not only to China's nuclear posturing but also to Chinese strategic pressure. National Security Adviser Menon stated that India's possession of a nuclear arsenal has had a deterrent effect, and successfully prevented nuclear blackmail ever since Pokhran-II. Nonetheless, concerns remain when it comes to asymmetry in terms of capabilities, in particular since the Chinese continue to develop and upgrade their delivery systems, and the China-Pakistan proliferation continues despite repeated protests from New Delhi.

Notwithstanding all the ongoing concerns and new challenges, it is important to note that official Indian discourse has very few mentions of China actually being a security 'threat' to India. The only time this happened was in the late 1990s in the weeks before Pokhran-II, when Defence Minister Fernandes labelled China 'potential threat number one' and Prime Minister Vajpayee's letter to Bill Clinton was leaked. China's military modernization or its increasing military budget in itself is not labelled as a concern, but as something that must be closely watched. The official discourse does not directly address the 'string of pearls' concept or the institutional clashes of interests in the ASEAN or in the East Asia Summit (EAS); nor does it make any references to nationalism, transparency issues, civil-military relations, or internal unrest in China.

It seems Indian policymakers are looking to find a fine balance in which they can publicly address their concerns over a rising China, while not invoking the 'China threat' theory, and antagonize Beijing. One way they have done this in the recent past is to add the element of 'competition' in the discourse, accepting that not all elements of their maturing relationship can be cast in terms of cooperation and coordination.

This Occasional Paper looks at the idea of China being a potential security threat as spoken about in India's official discourse that is, as written down in annual reports or governmental statements or mentioned in the speeches of Indian officials. It does not analyse India's foreign policy, the strategic environment, or offer a new perspective on the development of bilateral security relations. Instead, the aim is to identify which drivers and themes figure most prominently in New Delhi's publicly uttered concerns over a rising China, and to see if, when and how India's official rhetoric has changed over time. The three themes that figure largely in the discourse—the contested border, nuclear proliferation, and China's inroads into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) are discussed in separate sections. The Occasional Paper begins with a generic analysis of the overall discourse, and discusses the specific themes identified above subsequently. This Occasional Paper does not address statements made by retired officials or servicemen or reports or articles. Although their opinions give valuable insights, they do not, strictly speaking, speak in any official capacity.



Peter van der Hoest is a Ph. D Candidate at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) in Tokyo, Japan. His research focuses on comparative official and public discourses over a rising China.



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रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

No.1, Development Enclave, Rao Tula Ram Marg,
Delhi Cantt., New Delhi - 110 010
Tel.: (91-11) 2671-7983 Fax: (91-11) 2615 4191
E-mail: contactus@idsa.in Website: <http://www.idsa.in>

