

China-India Brief

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Guest Column

Uncertain Aims on the Line of Actual Control

By Daniel Markey

Three years after a deadly brawl between Indian and Chinese forces along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), relations between Beijing and New Delhi remain in what Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has repeatedly described as an “**abnormal**” condition. Strangely, at the heart of a dispute that has persisted over decades now lie troubling questions about the basic policy aims of both sides. Whereas until the early 2010s Beijing and New Delhi appear to have understood each other’s priorities, core interests, and redlines sufficiently to manage the border without serious violence, a stepwise uptick in border skirmishing since then—with no end in sight—suggests that they now lack clarity.

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The *China-India Brief* is a bi-monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia’s two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

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Roots of Uncertainty

Addressing this gap in understanding would be a helpful first step on the way to finding a way out of this impasse, but to date, neither side has shown an interest in greater transparency about their respective aims or plans. In international relations, a degree of uncertainty about an adversary's objectives is normal. In this case, however, several features complicate the story further.

Above all, there is China's undemocratic and exceptionally **opaque decision-making process**, especially on matters of national security. Lacking opposition politics or investigative journalism, China's official statements and military operations are rarely subject to serious scrutiny or public debate. In addition, China's leaders appear to believe that **opacity can serve a strategic purpose** by depriving adversaries the ability to anticipate and preempt or counter Chinese actions. In its border negotiations with India, Beijing has even **refused to share maps** of its border claims, ostensibly because doing so would constrain its bargaining position.

For their part, India's leaders are only marginally more transparent, and often only because their hands have been forced by opposition politicians or **disclosures** from independent journalists. Yet, even India's national leadership has been unwilling to engage in a full and public discussion of the border dispute or India's policy aims and initiatives.

As a result, we lack a comprehensive and compelling explanation of what the two sides are really aiming to accomplish: how they define their goals, what would satisfy them, and whether Chinese and Indian ends are fundamentally incompatible. Both sides—and outside observers—are thus left to speculate about each side's intentions.

Chinese Aims

Assessments of Chinese aims tend to fall into four loose categories that can be grouped along a spectrum from least to most threatening for India.

The first and least threatening characterization of Chinese aims reflects the logic of a classic security dilemma. For years, China has **invested in border security infrastructure**, including airports and roadways that now enable it to project significant military power more swiftly to points along the LAC. All of these are consistent with broader national defence enhancements and China's status as a rising global power. Yet, even if the underlying intent of Chinese investments is defensive, they naturally inspire greater insecurity in neighboring India. At the very least, more forces stationed closer to the border means a greater likelihood for contact, disputes, and violence.



One pathway to easing the security dilemma would be for each side—through a negotiated process or unilateral choice—to invest in border defences that are by design poorly suited to offensive operations. For instance, a border bristling with capable air defenses and land fortifications but relatively few aircraft or other means to launch deep strikes into the other side would help to ease fears and enhance stability.

A second, marginally more threatening assessment of Chinese aims would be that Beijing is pursuing a coercive military strategy along the border driven in important ways by a **zero-sum status competition** with the goal of “putting India in its place,” and in so doing, send a message to the rest of the region about the perils of challenging China’s supremacy in Asia. By this logic, Chinese military actions along the LAC have a strategic and diplomatic ambition above and beyond any tactical or operational military imperative.

If this is Beijing’s purpose, it will lead China to take a fundamentally different approach than simply securing the border. To demonstrate its supremacy, China will not tolerate a stable military balance. Instead, it would need to establish a sustainable asymmetry that forces India to accept its own inferiority. Given the nationalist politics of the Indian government (and **increasingly**, the Indian public as well), this would be difficult to accept and could easily result in increasingly high stakes standoffs driven by geopolitical and political concerns more than by military logics alone.

A third, even more worrisome possibility is that China is undertaking a gambit along the LAC similar to its **“salami slicing”** in the South China Sea, but with the greater strategic aim of diverting India’s military investments from the Indo-Pacific to the high Himalayas. By threatening small incursions along a long and difficult border, China presents India with a difficult choice: either accept the indignity and tactical losses

of Chinese territorial “**nibbling**” in ways that are not easily reversed, or undertake a costly program to deter Chinese attacks by denying it the prospect of *faits accomplis* all along the border. The latter ‘deterrence by denial’—which India appears to be attempting at present by its extensive forward deployment of troops—stresses the Indian army’s budget and saps morale.

Finite military budgets would then require India to economise in other ways, **likely including India’s navy**. By tying down India’s military on land, China could make India a less capable competitor in the maritime Indo-Pacific. That could offer China’s forces greater freedom of action as it expands its naval presence at numerous points from the Malacca Strait to the Persian Gulf and east Africa. Accordingly, if this is China’s purpose, the question, for India, is whether it can come up with a more cost-effective means to manage the LAC, contain the political fallout from Chinese nibbling, and in the process, maintain a more favorable balance of maritime power in the Indo-Pacific.

Most threatening of all is the prospect that China is laying the groundwork for a major military offensive to achieve strategic or political aims. In a worst-case scenario, China could be planning a limited land grab focused on the politically sensitive territory of **Tawang**, home to one of the oldest Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, or even the annexation of vast swathes of territory in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

Because even a successful invasion would come at a considerable military and diplomatic cost, it must be considered highly unlikely. Moreover, for Beijing neither Tawang nor Arunachal Pradesh holds anything like the political salience of Taiwan.

Nonetheless, a major invasion cannot be ruled out, as Tawang in particular holds cultural, historical, and political significance for Tibet and, by extension, for Beijing’s project of asserting total control over that region. Beijing routinely asserts claims of sovereignty over the whole of Arunachal Pradesh, refers to it as “Zangnan” or “southern Tibet,” and has on multiple occasions announced official **Chinese names** for features within it. In combination, China’s actions present a plausible threat to India and a fundamentally different problem of deterrence and defence than mere border “nibbling” or other minor tussles.

Indian Aims

Although India’s aims along the LAC are more openly debated than China’s, the Modi government can hardly be accused of full transparency on this matter. The prime minister has rarely addressed the topic, and his lieutenants usually speak in oblique and unspecific terms. This raises at least two legitimate questions about how New Delhi perceives and pursues its interests along the LAC.

The first question is whether India's border policies—including its own longstanding programme of improving the transportation infrastructure along the LAC as well as investments in new, more capable border forces, and even New Delhi's brazen 2019 revocation of the special legal status of Jammu and Kashmir—have themselves been a principal cause of escalating tensions with China. While Indian analysts tend to characterise New Delhi's border defence actions as (often all-too-belated) responses to Chinese provocations, **Chinese analysts tend to argue the reverse**. They suggest that recent skirmishes are the natural result of pent-up Chinese frustration from years of Indian encroachments and affronts. Moving forward, the question is whether India's leaders might perceive tactical or even strategic value in probing and provoking China, perhaps over issues related to Tibet, beyond what might be anticipated on the basis of a purely defensive agenda.

The second question—increasingly **posed by opposition critics** of the BJP government—is whether India's normally tough-talking prime minister is primarily focused on securing India's border or is more concerned about domestic political priorities. Critics charge that Modi's government has **concealed the full extent of Chinese border encroachments**, and there can be no doubt that the prime minister is sensitive to the political dimensions of the dispute. To be sure, there

can be sound reasons for keeping a lid on public posturing in a confrontation with an extremely powerful neighbour; India would not be well-served by nationalistic bluster if it leads to a costly escalation. Then again, if media coverage and election cycles dictate India's border policy, it raises the risk that New Delhi would escalate on the basis of events that are—to some extent at least—beyond Beijing's control.

Real Dangers

In sum, persistent uncertainties about the motivations and aspirations of China and India create real dangers. For India, incorrect assessments of China's aims will mean over (or under) investment in land border defences. Similarly, Beijing could easily miscalculate about the likelihood and scale of an Indian response to its actions. For the rest of the world, these uncertainties make it extremely difficult to anticipate how the border dispute is likely to evolve and how best to engage without unintentionally contributing to the potential for dangerous escalation.

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