

China-India Brief

A publication of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation



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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.



Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons/Eric Feng

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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Matarbari: A Deep-Sea Port at the Heart of a Deep-Seated Regional and Global Rivalry

By Shahana Thankachan

A basic Google search on the Matarbari port in Bangladesh will produce several articles that refer to the port as an India-Japan collaboration or as a 'strategic victory' for India and Japan against China. While the role of Japan in the development of the port is quite unambiguous, the role of India is not. The objective of the paper is to analyse the role of India and Japan in the Matarbari port development; what this port as an India-Japan collaboration means in light of the larger US-China great power rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region; and to understand the position of Bangladesh in this strategic environment.

Background

Matarbari port is a deep-sea port being built in the Moheshkhali subdistrict of Cox Bazaar district in Bangladesh. Located on the south-eastern coast of Bangladesh, south of Chattogram port (formerly known as Chittagong) it was initially being built to support the Matarbari coal plant. The Matarbari coal power plant was **proposed in 2011** and has been under construction with generous funding from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) which first extended an Official Development Assistance

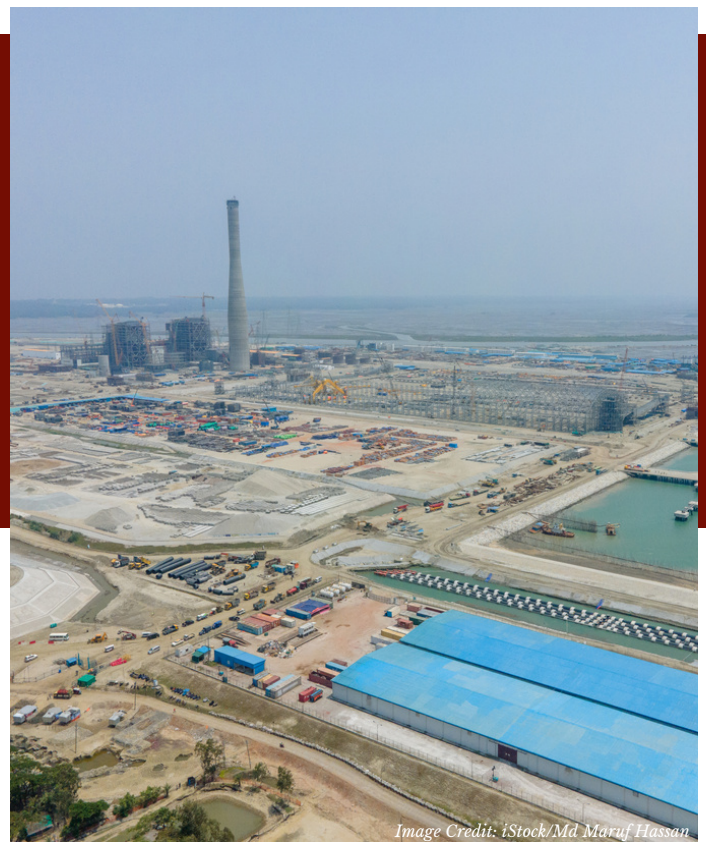


Image Credit: iStock/Md Maruf Hassan

(ODA) loan of 41 billion Yen for the coal power plant in 2014.

In 2018, the government of Bangladesh decided to turn the port into a **deep-sea port**, estimated to be completed by January 2027. JICA extended several loans for the development of both the Matarbari deep-sea port and the coal power plant. While the Chittagong Port Authority is also funding the project, Japan will be the majority investor. India is not making any direct financial investments in the port, which raises the question of India's actual role. In order to understand the role of India and Japan in the project, it is important to understand the importance of the port for the different stakeholders.

Economic Importance of the Matarbari Port

Matarbari port's importance for Bangladesh lies in the fact that it will be the country's first deep-sea port. Bangladesh has had to rely on other deep-sea ports in the region, such as those at Colombo, Singapore and Malaysia, which greatly increases the transshipment cost for ships coming to/going from Bangladesh. As a deep-sea port, container ships with larger drafts will be able to dock directly instead of taking feeder ships to/from the bigger regional ports. In fact, Matarbari will be able to handle ships of deeper draft and larger cargo capacity than Chattogram port—currently the largest port in Bangladesh. The development of Matarbari port is expected to transform Bangladesh into a regional transshipment hub, increasing the country's gross domestic product by 2-3 percent, and raising it to middle-income status.

Neighbouring landlocked countries like **Nepal and Bhutan** will also benefit immensely from the development of the deep-sea port, as it would reduce regional transshipment costs for their goods. India's landlocked northeast region too will likely get an economic boost, with the improved connectivity to Dhaka.

Strategic Importance of the Matarbari Port

In order to understand the strategic importance of Matarbari port, it is crucial to know about an adjacent proposed port at

Sonadia, located less than 50 km from Matarbari. Back in 2006, **Sonadia** was actually put forward as the most viable location for a deep-sea port. China was keen on developing the port and even submitted a detailed project proposal for the same. However, an agreement between Bangladesh and China **never materialised**. Instead, Dhaka announced in 2018 that the deep-sea port would be constructed at Matarbari with Japanese assistance. The final nail for Sonadia port came in 2020 when Bangladesh officially **announced that it was scrapping the project**.

Bangladesh cited environmental concerns and economic unviability as the reason for scrapping the project in Sonadia. Yet, though there is some truth to the view that Sonadia would cause environmental damage, the same can be said for Matarbari. A **Greenpeace Japan** report stated that the air pollution caused by the Matarbari coal power plant, of which the Matarbari port is a part, would significantly increase premature deaths in Bangladesh. This indicates that other factors were likely at play in deciding the fate of the Sonadia project.

Some experts like **Anu Anwar** believe that pressure from India played a major role in Bangladesh's decision. And indeed, India has good reasons to pressure Bangladesh. If Sonadia port was developed by China, it would strengthen Chinese presence in the Bay of Bengal—deep in India's sphere of influence. The distance from Sonadia to the



headquarters of India’s Eastern Naval Command, located at Visakhapatnam, would be just 541 nautical miles (nm); and the distance to Kolkata, another important base for the Indian navy would be even less, at a distance of just 173 nm. Most significantly, a China-controlled port in Sonadia would put the Andaman and Nicobar Islands—what India sees as its natural aircraft carrier and one of its most important strategic assets in the Indian Ocean—dangerously close to the Chinese presence. Though China’s planned role in the Sonadia project was as a port developer, with Bangladesh retaining ownership, the **example of Hambantota port** in Sri Lanka demonstrated how such ownership could be lost to Beijing, and why New Delhi remains wary of China’s involvement in the region’s port development projects.

Matarbari port also serves an important purpose for India’s northeast region, comprising the ‘seven sister states.’

Mainland India’s only land connection with this region is through a narrow stretch of land called the Siliguri Corridor, or ‘Chicken’s Neck.’ China shares more land border with this region through Arunachal Pradesh than the rest of India does. India has several active border disputes with China in this region. Thus, while India’s northeast region holds great strategic importance, it is geographically isolated and has historically been one of the country’s most underdeveloped areas. The Japan-backed Matarbari port will provide another connection into the region for India. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida during his visit to India in March 2023 talked about the development of a Bay of Bengal-Northeast India **industrial value chain** in cooperation with India and Bangladesh. This highlights the strategic importance of the port.

Great Power Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific Region

Matarbari Port's significance also lies in the larger importance that Bangladesh as a country holds in ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific. Japan and India are two of the key players in the narrative of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific.' Along with Australia and the United States, they are members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad). Increasing Chinese investment and naval presence in the Indo-Pacific region has been a great cause of concern for the Quad. Japan has a large stake in the trade that passes through the waters of the Indian Ocean and wants to prevent this region from following in the footsteps of the South China Sea. Japan and Bangladesh recently elevated their relationship to a **strategic partnership**. Japan is Bangladesh's largest development aid partner, and the number of Japanese companies operating in Bangladesh has more than tripled in the last ten years. In the case of India, in addition to being a historical ally, Bangladesh is also considered a core part of its 'Neighbourhood First' policy and an important partner in its 'Act East' policy.

Double Hedging by Bangladesh

Bangladesh's position in the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy has been ambiguous at best. Bangladesh has throughout its history adhered to a non-aligned principle in its foreign policy. However, On April 24, 2023, Bangladesh seemingly aligned itself with

the US when it announced its own official "Indo-Pacific Outlook." Along with the case of Matarbari port, it is very tempting to conclude that Bangladesh is shedding some of its strategic ambiguity and aligning closer to the Quad as a grouping. But the reality is more complex. A deeper look at Dhaka's Indo-Pacific document reveals that Bangladesh has been very careful to not ruffle any feathers. The usage of the term "outlook" instead of "strategy" is a case in point. Moreover, one of its primary guiding principles is the foreign policy dictum of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: 'Friendship towards all, malice toward none.' The tone of the document also highlights Bangladesh's focus on economic cooperation rather than security.

Just looking at the outcome of Matarbari port on its own, it may indeed seem like some sort of 'strategic loss' for China. However, it must be remembered that China continues to enjoy immense influence in Bangladesh. China remains Bangladesh's **biggest trade partner** and its largest source of imports. China also claims to be the **biggest source** of foreign direct investment (FDI) into Bangladesh amounting to USD 940 million for the 2022 fiscal year. Bangladesh joined the **Belt and Road Initiative** in 2016, and China has invested an estimated USD 9.7 billion in transportation projects in Bangladesh, some of which, are expected to have strategic implications. In addition, Bangladesh is also set to receive more than **USD 40 billion** in

Chinese investments under the bilateral partnership.

Bangladesh is often cited as a close friend of India, but this relationship must also be contextualised in light of the domestic politics of both countries. While the current ruling party in Bangladesh—the Awami League (AL)—is considered close to India because of their historical ties, this is not necessarily the case with other political parties in the country, such as the Bangladesh National Party (BNP). Moreover, Bangladesh has seen **several protests** against the policies of India’s current ruling party—the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)—for what it considers a **discriminatory approach** towards Indian minorities.

While it may be conceded that politically and culturally, Bangladesh is closer to India than to China, it is also a reality that India cannot compete with China in terms of the financial aid and investments it can provide to Bangladesh. In this respect, India has allowed close allies such as Japan to enter the picture to compensate for its own economic constraints. Japan is the only foreign country that India has ever allowed to invest in its northeast region and in the **Andaman and Nicobar islands**. Bangladesh, therefore, will continue to hedge with China and India simultaneously. It will prioritise its economic development while ensuring not to cross any Indian red lines.

The port in itself is undoubtedly a strategic victory for India and Japan, and for the Quad as a whole, but it is not enough to ascertain the position of Bangladesh in this equation. The competition for Bangladesh is a long game, and it is too soon to announce the winner.

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News Reports

Bilateral relations

China-India 'disconnect' could fuel 'summer of discontent' along disputed border

South China Morning Post, May 22

Disagreements between the neighbours and growing geopolitical rivalry in the region is fuelling a possible escalation in military activity.

China Wants 15-20 km Buffer Zone Inside India-Claimed Lines for Depsang Disengagement

The Wire, May 22

'It's apparent that they are working aggressively to establish a revised status quo along the Line of Actual Control,' said the ITBP official.

Indian PM Modi says peace on border essential for normal ties with China

Reuters, May 19

The comments mark a rare articulation of New Delhi's position since ties with Beijing deteriorated in 2020.

Amid row with China, India moves to boost conventional missile arsenal

The Times of India, May 17

Development of the Pralay ballistic missiles has been completed by the DRDO, while the long-range land-attack cruise missiles and submarine-launched cruise missiles, will also be ready for production within a couple of years.

China and India in the Region

Tightening Of Strategic Ties With Pacific Islands By India, US A 'Game Changer'

ABP Live, May 22

India and the US took a quantum leap together in an effort to counter China's growing influence in the South Pacific region by tightening strategic, defence and economic ties with the island nations there that will prove to be a "game changer", according to top diplomatic sources.

Beijing chides Japan, Britain and 'anti-China' G7 summit

Today Online, May 22

The joint communique issued singled out China on issues ranging from Taiwan and maritime claims, to economic coercion and human rights.

China opposes G-20 meeting in India-ruled Kashmir and will skip it

The Straits Times, May 21

"China is firmly opposed to holding any kind of G-20 meetings in disputed territory, and will not attend such meetings," Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said.

"We Strongly Oppose...": Quad Countries' Thinly Veiled Swipe At China

NDTV, May 21

The group did not mention China by name but the communist superpower was clearly the target of language in a joint statement calling for "peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain".

Trade and Economy

G7 aligns on shared 'de-risk, not decouple' approach to China

Reuters, May 20

G7 leaders said they were prepared to build "constructive and stable" relations with Beijing while reducing their dependence on trade with the world's second largest economy.

India looks to build consensus at WTO to block non-trade issues

The Economic Times, May 18

"Brazil, China, Thailand and South Africa are some of the countries which could get affected and we will try to build a consensus with them," said a government official.

China lifts ban on Australian timber imports in another sign of improving bilateral relations

The Hindu, May 18

For the first time in more than two years, China has allowed imports of Australian timber, another indication that the two countries' strained relationship is being healed.

Apple supplier Foxconn breaks ground on \$500 million India factory

CNBC, May 15

The expansion comes as global companies like Apple push suppliers to diversify their supply chain and production sites beyond China.

Energy and Environment

Why a delay to South Asia's monsoon could mean more heatwaves, and spell 'bad news' for the world's rice supply

South China Morning Post, May 19

The region's climate is likely to be of global importance as India, Thailand and Vietnam are the world's top three rice suppliers.

When It Comes to Clean Electricity, India Ranks 9th Among the G20: Report

The Wire, May 16

India's continued and high dependence on coal for power is to blame. Brazil, which will take over G20 presidency from India next year, is in first place in the think tank Ember's fourth annual Global Electricity Review.

Oil price dip ignores burgeoning Chinese demand and imminent supply crunch, IEA warns

CNBC, May 16

The world's largest crude oil importer, China, will account for nearly 60% of global demand growth in 2023, the IEA anticipates.

Analyses

A new geopolitical battlefield is emerging in the Pacific

Mint, May 22

By Harsh V. Pant, Vice President—Studies and Foreign Policy at Observer Research Foundation

The US and India no longer seem diffident about joining hands to counter the rising influence of China.

India and China's rivalry is reshaping South Asia

The Strategist, May 18

By Genevieve Donnellon-May, Asia-Pacific Analyst at The Red Line podcast, Researcher at the Oxford Global Society, and a 2023 CSIS Pacific Forum Young Leader

This unstable environment offers smaller South Asian countries—who might be concerned about an asymmetry of power in India's favour in their bilateral relationships—opportunities to use offers from China to get a better deal with India, and vice versa.

On climate action, India and China should do better by their neighbours

South China Morning Post, May 17

By Rizwan Basir, Senior Technical Specialist at Climate Resourcing and Coordination Center (CRCC)

China and India may have the resources to cope with the consequences, but their neighbours do not have the same level of adaptive capacity.

India's South China Sea posture is still in its infancy

Observer Research Foundation, May 17

By Abhijit Singh, Senior Fellow at ORF

Overstating Indian activism in the Western Pacific creates a false narrative that is harmful to balanced policymaking.

India tilts West as Russian ties cool

GIS Reports, May 16

By James Jay Carafano, Vice President for Foreign and Defence Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation and Director of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies.

With China and Russia tightening their alliance, India is reacting by improving its ties with the United States, Europe and other Asian nations.

Books and Journals

Separately together: Indian and American approaches to China during the Trump era
India Review 22, no. 2 (2023): 161-171

By Deepa Ollapally, Research Professor at the Elliot School of International Studies, George Washington University, and Raj Verma, Associate Professor at Huaqiao University

This article highlights the convergence and divergence between India and the US pertaining to China under the Trump administration. Given Trump's forceful personality and apparent chemistry with Modi, it is tempting to attribute bilateral relations to individual leaders. However, systemic pressures due to shared concerns over China's rise and aggressive behavior played a significant role in keeping relations on track and ultimately deepening them. This led to increasing Indo-US cooperation in the Quad especially after the Galwan Valley cash in June 2020 although India initially feared entrapment. While there was convergence on the broad contours of the threat of a Sino-centric Asia, coming to agreement on specific strategies to prevent it faced its share of challenges with Trump wanting New Delhi to do more to counter China and do it faster. There was also divergence related to India's continuing attachment to strategic autonomy underwritten by a multipolar world order, and Indian and American definitions of the boundaries of the Indo-Pacific and how the priority areas of each differed.



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OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

- *Deterring Conflict and Preserving Peace in Asia* edited by Drew Thompson and Byron Chong (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, 2022)
- *What Can the United States Learn from China about Infrastructure?* by Selina Ho in *The China Questions 2* (Harvard University Press, 2022)
- *Failure to launch? Indonesia against China's Grey Zone Tactics* by Evan Laksmana (IDSS Paper No.37)
- *India-Australia-Indonesia Maritime Partnership: Shared Challenges, Compelling Opportunities* by Premesha Saha, Natalie Sambhi, and Evan Laksmana (ORF, 2022)
- *India Versus China : Why they are Not Friends* by Kanti Bajpai (Juggernaut Books, 2021)
- *Winning the Fight Taiwan Cannot Afford to Lose* by Drew Thompson (Strategic Forum, 2021)
- *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations* edited by Kanti Bajpai, Selina Ho and Manjari Chatterjee Miller (Routledge, 2020)



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and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore

China-India Brief is supported by Wilmar International Limited

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