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Guest Column

Managing Stability in China-India Security Relations: Challenges and Prospects

By Chiara Cervasio

Recent developments in global politics show that states have failed to prevent major conflicts in crucial regional hotspots, re-emphasising the importance of maintaining stability in key security relations. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 took the world by surprise, despite signs of instability in Eastern Europe tracing back to the Russian annexations of Georgia and Crimea in 2008 and 2014, respectively. Similarly, Hamas's unprecedented attacks on Israel and the ongoing war

Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

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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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between the two actors in Gaza (a powder keg that was ready to explode any minute) have been a shock to the international community. Such failures in conflict prevention are testing and stretching relations amongst adversaries, some of which are armed with nuclear weapons, and increasing the risk of dangerous escalations. Similar disasters can be prevented if stability in key security relationships is prioritised and preserved.

The China-India dyad is one such key relationship. The current security equilibrium between the two countries is fragile and the possibility of a major bilateral crisis or even armed conflict erupting in the next couple of decades cannot be excluded. There is a serious trust deficit between China and India, a lack of robust diplomatic and strategic dialogue, and several unresolved security issues which remain either stalled or ignored. This, coupled with a global strategic environment increasingly fraught with distrust, uncertainty, and continuous military build-ups, is undermining the stability of China-India security relations. There are three main interrelated sources of tension that have the potential to spark a major bilateral crisis: the border dispute, the nuclear dimension, and opposing balancing blocs in a changing geostrategic environment.

The Border Dispute

India and China share a 3,400 km long disputed border and fought a short border war that ended without any mutual agreement in 1962. Despite numerous diplomatic and military-to-military talks over the years, the border dispute has not been settled. Incidents along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) have been numerous, and a major clash in 2020 resulted in the killing of both Indian and Chinese soldiers. Since then, **military build-ups** on both sides have continued at the border. Recently, tensions seem to have been partially mitigated, as interactions between military officials on both sides in early October 2023 resulted in a **mutual pledge** to resolve the border dispute soon. This is a very positive development in a period of strained relationships between the two countries. However, military talks at the border are not uncommon and similar pledges have been made in the past. Therefore, any resolution of the border dispute will only be possible if talks are held at the state level.

The intensification of skirmishes and incidents at the border since 2020 signals that the China-India border dispute has become more salient. As the two countries continue to modernise their conventional and nuclear capabilities, and mutual distrust increases, the possibility of military accidents or even a military conflict to change the status quo at the border remains, especially if this will serve the interests of nationalistic leaderships.

The Nuclear Dimension

India and China both possess nuclear weapons, but the nuclear dimension has so far not figured prominently in their bilateral security relationship. China does not

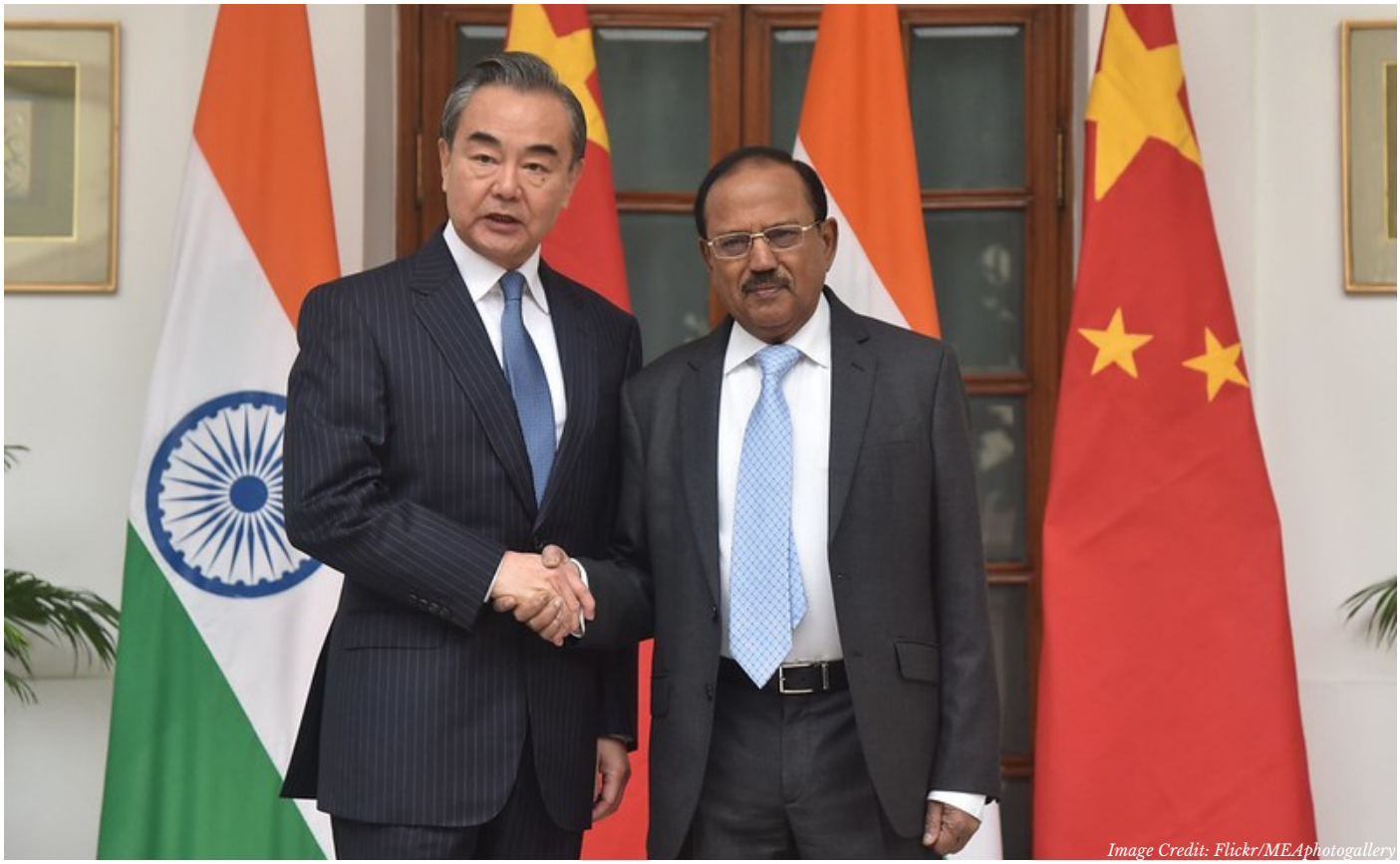


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recognise India's nuclear status outside of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and, therefore, there is no dialogue or engagement on nuclear issues between the two countries. Both countries have pledged to observe a No First Use (NFU) policy, seeing nuclear weapons as tools for strategic deterrence. India mostly looks and responds to Pakistan's nuclear developments, while China's nuclear arsenal is mostly aimed at deterring the United States (US). Despite recent developments and modernisation efforts in both the **Chinese** and **Indian** nuclear weapon capabilities and postures, their nuclear relationship remains stable. There is relatively **low mutual nuclear threat perception**, and the major security concern on both sides remain the threat of conventional war at the border.

The India-Pakistan rivalry is currently the only clear nuclear deterrence dyad in Southern Asia. However, **several factors** might push China and India into a full-fledged nuclear deterrence relationship in the coming years, including the rise of nationalist domestic politics, technology competition and arms racing, and continuous tensions at the border. Moreover, the lack of a nuclear bilateral dialogue will increase the risk of misperceptions and miscalculations, especially as the two countries develop and deploy **nuclear-armed ballistic missiles submarines (SSBNs)** into the oceans. Such developments can make nuclear escalation in China-India relations more likely in the coming years.

Opposing Balancing Blocs

China and India do not operate in isolation. They respond to a changing multipolar geostrategic environment, which is increasingly fragmented into balancing blocs that risk turning the two countries further against each other. On the one hand, perceptions of **Western encirclement** and an increasing convergence of economic and security interests have pushed China into a strong strategic partnership with Russia. On the other hand, India has committed to a close and enduring partnership with the US in the Indo-Pacific, including a recent **boost in defence cooperation** within the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or Quad), intensifying Chinese threat perceptions.

Several possible developments within these blocs can pose challenges to China-India bilateral relations. First is the question of whether and how India will coordinate its response with Indo-Pacific partners should China take assertive actions in the South China Sea, or in the event of a **new Taiwan Strait crisis**. Second, should China's perception of encirclement and containment in the Indo-Pacific intensify, the country can decide to renew its support for Pakistan in the event of a new India-Pakistan crisis. This can alter the complex deterrence dynamics within the **nuclear tetraplex** (comprising China, India, Pakistan, and the US), challenging strategic stability in Southern Asia. The resilience of China-India relations will also be tested in other regional contexts, such as the Arctic, as the two countries gained the status of observers in the Arctic Council in 2013 and have increasing economic and security interests in the region. Arctic states that are or will soon be part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), including Canada, Denmark via Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the US, are looking at the deepening China-Russia partnership in the region with concern. In the past few years, China intensified economic investments in the Russian Arctic, planning to build a Polar Silk Road through the Northern Sea Route (the Russian part of the North East Passage), and the two countries recently signed a **coast guard cooperation agreement**. As the NATO vs Russia-China divide takes form in the Arctic, India should carefully think about which role it can and wants to play within these balancing blocs.

How to Maintain Stability in China-India Security Relations

A major China-India bilateral crisis with the potential to escalate into a conventional or even a nuclear conflict would have disastrous consequences. The two countries should take responsibility to manage contentious issues in their bilateral relations to avoid the risk of a dangerous conflict. Their foremost priority should be that progress made so far at the military level (e.g., through military-to-military talks at the border) is translated into a full-fledged strategic security dialogue at the state level. China and India had already established a security dialogue in 1999. However,

interactions have not been regular, and substantive security issues, such as the border dispute or the nuclear dimension, have not been addressed. As the nuclear dimension becomes more salient in China-India security relations, the two countries should find ways to discuss nuclear issues, for example through the principle of **"engagement without recognition,"** which can lead to cooperation on specific nuclear confidence-building measures, such as incidents at sea and pre-notification of missile test agreements. A quadrilateral nuclear risk reduction dialogue including Pakistan and the US should be started to address the intricacies of the nuclear tetraplex and the regional and global consequences of deterrence breakdowns. Moreover, China and India should not fall prey to the resurgent Cold-War mentality that is re-splitting the world into dangerous balancing blocs. India is in a unique position to breach these blocs, having high-level strategic partnerships with both the US and Russia. The resurgence of Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai can therefore not only avert China-India bilateral crises but can also crucially serve to promote stability within the current multipolar geostrategic environment.

Chiara Cervasio, PhD, is a Policy Fellow at the British American Security Information Council (BASIC) and a Programme Manager for Nuclear Responsibilities, a joint project between BASIC and the University of Birmingham. Chiara also collaborates with the BASIC's Programme on Risk Reduction in the Arctic. She tweets at @CervasioChiara.

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News Reports

Bilateral relations

"Pose As Lawyers, Activists": How Chinese Accounts Spread Fake News in India
NDTV, December 5
Meta reports a growing use of fake Facebook accounts originating from China, pretending to be Indians.

China, India hope to 'turn the page' on Himalayan border tensions, push military-level talks
South China Morning Post, December 1
Both countries have completed their 28th round of diplomatic talks on border issues and have agreed to "maintain the momentum of diplomatic and military negotiations."

India is not in dialogue with China on maritime challenges, says Indian Navy Chief
The Hindu Business Line, December 1
India is actively engaged in capacity building with friendly countries in the region and is expanding its Navy fleet.

India To Get Aircraft Carrier Worth $5 Billion to Counter Chinese Presence In Indian Ocean
Marine Insight News Network, November 30
The Indian Defense Acquisition Council is expected to approve the acquisition of a 400 billion rupees aircraft carrier to expand the Indian Navy's military capabilities and counterbalance China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean region.

China and India in the Region

Italy's exit from China's Belt & Road Initiative. Why India should be happy
Livemint, December 8
Italy's decision to discontinue the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) not only reflects increased caution towards China in the broader Western world but also presents an opportunity for India to foster closer engagements.

India's aim to surpass China as Global South leader unaffected by its support for Israel
South China Morning Post, December 7
India's position as a Global South leader is unlikely to be affected by its continued support for Israel.

A China rivalry twist emerges in Sri Lanka's new US- funded, Indian-built port
South China Morning Post, December 4
As part of the Quad's infrastructure initiative, a US-funded container port terminal project, partly owned by India's Adani Group, will be constructed in Colombo to counter the escalating Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Israel-Hamas war: India maintains a fine balance as Arab nations woo China
The Week, December 2
Compared to India's nuanced approach to the Gaza conflict, China's stronger response, putting pressure and condemning the conflict, was more favorably received by the Global South.

Trade and Economy

India's April-Oct. steel imports from China at four-year high

Hellenic Shipping News, December 1

China emerged as the top exporter of finished steel to India during April-October, shipping 1.1 million metric tons of the alloy.

Indian economy grew faster than expected on manufacturing, govt spending

Reuters, December 1

This surge can be attributed to an increase in government spending and manufacturing growth, raising expectations that India's economy will continue to outperform its neighbors.

Move aside, China. India will drive Asia's growth in the next few years, S&P Global says

CNBC, November 30

While China is expected to achieve a GDP growth rate of 5.4 percent in 2024, India's economy is projected to grow at a faster pace, with an anticipated growth rate of 6.4 percent in 2024.

Emerging world needs climate finance and to burn coal, India says

Reuters, November 30

India and China jointly oppose any attempt to impede construction of coal-fired power stations vital for their economies.

Energy and Environment

CO2 emissions to hit record in 2023 on China and India growth: Study

The Strait Times, December 6

In 2023, China's fossil fuel carbon dioxide emissions are projected to increase by 4 percent while India's carbon dioxide emissions are forecasted to surge by 8.2 percent.

India, China yet to sign pledge on renewable energy capacity

Hindustan Times, December 3

India and China have not yet committed to the pledge made at the UN Climate Conference to triple global renewable energy capacity by 2030, citing concerns related to phasing out unabated coal.

JSW, China's SAIC form new India venture for green mobility

CNA, December 1

The collaboration with JSW will additionally bolster the growth of SAIC's MG in India by enhancing the sourcing of local auto parts, expanding production capacity, and fostering the growth of its charging infrastructure.

India's green dilemma: Struggle for renewables as China powers up with coal

Business Standard, November 30

India's surging energy demands, coupled with a commitment to climate change mitigation, demand a comprehensive and thoughtful strategy prioritizing energy security and emissions reduction.

Analyses

West-imposed sanctions give China leverage in Myanmar

Deccan Herald, December 8

By Devendra Kumar, Associate Fellow, Centre for Himalayan Studies, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Shiv Nadar University

Western sanctions have compelled Myanmar to increasingly rely on China, leading to broader geopolitical and social implications for India and other countries in the Indo-Pacific.

The development demands of Bhutan should be respected by its neighbours

Global Times, December 6

By Zhang Xiaoyu, an expert in South Asian Studies, Communication University of China

India has expressed significant concern about the potential strategic disadvantage in the region if China continues to foster closer and mutually beneficial relations with Bhutan.

The Great Himalayan Chessboard: China, India, and the Geopolitical Gambit in Nepal

Foreign Policy Research Initiative, December 6

By Nara Sritharan, 2023 Templeton Fellow in the Asia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and Kritika Jothishankar, Research Assistant at AidData, Global Research Institute, and Sarah Wozniak, Research Assistant at AidData, Global Research Institute

Nepal has to navigate the interests of both China and India in its hydropower potential, which has become a focal point for great power geopolitical competition in the region.

India rising but China still ahead

The Pioneer, December 1

By Santhosh Mathew, Associate Professor, Centre for South Asian Studies, School of International Studies & Social Sciences Pondicherry Central University

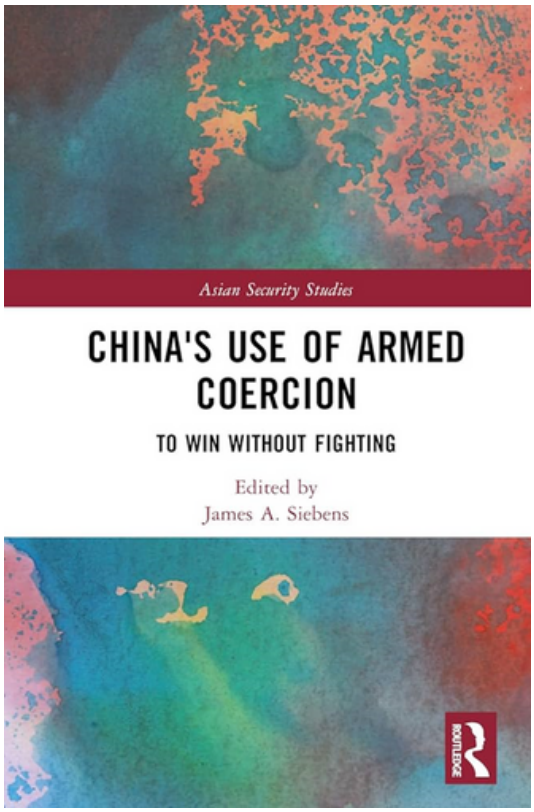
Building its narrative on soft power and ideals, as opposed to China's reliance on physical and economic might, India has ambitiously set its sights on challenging China's influence and becoming the leader of the Global South.

Books and Journals

China's Use of Armed Coercion: To Win Without Winning

Routledge, 2023

Edited by James A. Siebens, Fellow with the Stimson Centre's Reimagining U.S. Grand Strategy Program and was also previously a Research Associate and Special Assistant to the President and CEO at the Stimson Centre



This book analyses when, how, why, and to what effect China has used its armed forces in recent decades to coerce other actors in the international system.

Over the past 20 years, China's international status as a "great power" has become undeniable. China's "peaceful rise" has included substantial investments in military modernization and an increasingly assertive regional posture. While China has not waged war since 1979, it has frequently resorted to what the U.S. State Department has referred to as "gangster tactics" – threats, intimidation, and armed confrontation – to advance its strategic aims. This volume illuminates the ways in which China has employed its military and paramilitary tools to coerce other states, and examines the motivations and specific foreign policy objectives that China has pursued using force short of war. The study presents new analysis of an original dataset on coercive actions undertaken by China's armed forces, taking into account the political objectives pursued

arrative on soft power and ideals, as opposed to China's reliance on physical and economic might, India has ambitiously set its sights on challenging China's influence and becoming the leader of the Global South.

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OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

- *Partnership or Polarization? Southeast Asian Security between India and China* edited by Evan Laksmana and Byron Chong (Contemporary Southeast Asia, 2023)
- *Asian Conceptions of International Order: What Asia Wants* edited by Kanti Bajpai and Evan Laksmana (International Affairs, 2023)
- *How Realist Is India's National Security Policy?* edited by Kanti Bajpai (Routledge, 2023)
- *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)
- *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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