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Himanil Raina

OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION

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About the Author

Himanil Raina is a B.A. LL.B (Hons.) student at the NALSAR University of Law. Previously a Research Intern at the Institute for Security Studies at the Observer Research Foundation, his work has been featured in various publications, including the *Diplomat*, the *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, the *Georgetown Journal of the International Affairs*, the *Harvard International Review (Online)*, and the *International Strategic and Security Studies Program*. His interests lie in the the study of strategy, maritime security, nuclear warfare, asymmetric warfare, and the intersections of international law with international relations.

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Abstract

India and China, two of the world's oldest civilisations, have had little historically relevant interactions with one other. Separated by the world's highest mountain range, the Himalayas, neither of these two nations has ever displayed expansionist tendencies vis-à-vis each other. Both nations have a history of colonialism at the hands of Western powers and are excessively protective of their sovereignty and territorial integrity. They share a common desire to strengthen their nations by enhancing their economic affluence, pursuant to which both are invested, albeit to varying degrees, in the current global economic order and reliant on lengthy sea lines of communication to ferry their goods and resources. In contemporary times the principal security threats to both India and China emanate in entirely different theatres located in the exact opposite direction of each other. Why then is it that despite significant commonalities, relations between the two nations have been predominantly characterised by a narrative that projects both of them as inevitable strategic rivals? This is the question that is explored in this paper; it attempts to provide answers even as it highlights common grounds which, if pursued, can sound the death knell of such a narrative.

‘The relation[ship] between Asia's two great powers can best be characterized as one of global cooperation on transnational issues especially vis-à-vis the ‘West,’ geostrategic rivalry at the regional level in the form of growing commercial exchange and in some cases bilateral competition.’¹

Why the India-China Relationship Matters and Global Trends Shaping the Same

Home to the fastest growing economies of the world, the most rapidly rising military expenditures and the world's most explosive hotspots, the Asian region is undoubtedly widely predicted to own the 21st century. Central to this Asian resurgence is the simultaneous re-emergence of two major powers, China and India: Both nations are reclaiming their historical positions of economic global preeminence when they alone accounted for two-fifths of the world's wealth.^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6} The manner in which the Asian Century pans out will largely be contingent on the shape Sino-Indian ties take.⁷ Two contrary trends are defining the relationship at present. On the one hand are fiery, patriotism-fuelled territorial and maritime disputes as nations use newfound wealth to acquire military capabilities and compete over scarce resources; on the other are the flows of trade, investment and people in an increasingly interconnected region, fostering varying levels of interdependence.⁸ At the same time, the logic of realism still informs interstate interactions and is a very relevant prism through which regional developments can be viewed and understood.

The Promise of the Relationship

The first observation to be made by a student of Sino-Indian relations, is the striking absence of a vibrant tradition of commercial exchanges

between the two countries before the 20th century. Despite being adjunct to each other for millennia, neither nation has ever made a sustained attempt to project military power and political influence across the towering Himalayan mountain ranges that separate them. Sino-Indian borders meet along Tibet, a region located at very high altitudes with few passes enabling movement in between. The terrain in this case historically has, and continues to, act as a significant impediment to the projection of organised military power on a large scale onto each other's nations.

The second reason for greater warmth in Sino-Indian relations is their growing economic convergence. While it is not unreservedly advanced that the economic relations between the two nations have consistently mirrored the ebbs and flows in Sino-Indian relations, it would be imprudent to say that there is no link at all. For China, the seeds of heightened integration with the global economy were planted in the 1970s, with Premier Deng Xiaoping bringing about some fundamental structural changes.⁹ India, meanwhile, following the end of the Cold War initiated the process of shifting from a state-centric, mixed economic model in the 1990s to a more market-driven one. Integration into the world economy has seen closer links being forged between the two nations: Sino-Indian trade hovered in the millions (\$) in the 1980s, steadily ballooning over the years, and is now poised to breach the \$100-billion mark by 2015.¹⁰

The third factor flows from the second one and can be traced to radical changes in the international political economy which has, in turn, created the ideal conditions for Sino-Indian economic alignment.¹¹ Beijing's massive investment as a counter-cyclical stimulus in response to the 2008 global financial crisis was predicated upon the following assumption:

That following the West's recovery, consumer demand from the OECD world would resume its pre-crisis path. The massive debt buildup has been used to generate an oversupply in the real estate and infrastructure sectors which the domestic Chinese markets cannot absorb. Following the financial meltdown, the OECD economies cannot be expected to continue to extend their support for the cheap Chinese manufacturing industries that destroyed their own industrial sectors. Consider how US industries are projected to undergo a revival before this decade is through¹² and the argument for the decline of the US-headed offshore manufacturing from China becomes stronger. Another important structural constraint for China is demographics. The extensive growth strategy pursued by China results in an ever-increasing higher demand for raw materials to fuel its growth along with a cheap and massive labour force. While the last three decades saw a massive upwelling of labour force growth, the trends for future manpower growth are in the negative. Chinese society stands to start greying at a historically unprecedented rate over the next generation, highlighting the need for China to make structural changes in its economy.¹³ This is happening at a time when India, for its part, is projected to reap the benefits of a demographic dividend that will see it having the largest workforce in the world in the coming years.¹⁴ In an environment where the biggest consumers of the products of the Chinese production infrastructure start shifting away from China, a process of regionalisation will begin to occur.¹⁵

The dollar's declining value implies a loss for all creditors (including China). With America's debt sized at many times its GDP—and given the expected growth rates in the US, which are too low for the debt to be outgrown—a real decline in the US dollar looks quite certain. China will now be looking to direct its investments into new higher-yielding markets in emerging economies. At a time when India hopes to step into

China's shoes of being the world's assembling and offshoring location—even as China aims to cultivate an innovation-driven economic model—the grounds for cooperation between the two are quite evident.¹⁶ India's recently elected BJP government has made clear its intention to revive India's infrastructure and the inflow of foreign investments.¹⁷ In light of the creation of the BRICS bank,¹⁸ China's invitation to India to join the Asian Infrastructure Bank,¹⁹ the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation trade group,²⁰ and even the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization)²¹—there is a clear sense that the winds of change are blowing in Sino-Indian relations.²²

The fourth factor contributing to an optimistic appraisal of Sino-Indian relations is the commonality of aims that both nations have, vis-a-vis their positions in the international arena. Accelerated economic development experienced by India and China has concurrently led to an increase in all the elements of national power, military and otherwise. Both countries seek a re-ordering of the international status quo so as to reflect their new international status commensurate with their strength and influence. The belief that their civilisational greatness entitles them to great power status is firmly entrenched in the national consciousness of both nations.²³ The fear of loss of power that pervades the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) informs China's external outlook and national priorities. The lack of legitimacy owing to a closed political system is substituted for by reliance on nationalism and economic performance.²⁴ China's strategy has thus been characterised by a desire to secure and shape an environment conducive to enabling China's sustained economic development.²⁵ India has remarkably similar objectives to China in that it seeks a secure and stable environment so as to ensure its continued economic development. The social upliftment of the Indian

masses thus brought about would enable India to “take its rightful place in the comity of nations and attain its manifest destiny.”²⁶

Fifth, both countries find common ground in the fact that today they find themselves amidst turbulent neighbourhoods with fragile states, numerous insurgencies and competing claims of sovereignty over unresolved boundaries. In such a troubled and unstable strategic environment, both nations are relative beacons of stability whose cooperation in solving the region's problems could go a long way in creating a peaceful and stable region—something that is in the interest of both nations.²⁷ For example, both nations are troubled by the rising incidence of Islamist terrorism and find it in their common interest to have a stable Afghanistan especially in light of NATO's imminent withdrawal.²⁸ Non-traditional security challenges is another field which can lead to the cultivation of fruitful exchanges and cooperation between the two.²⁹

The sixth area of convergence between the two nations flows from their common interests of the need to import massive quantities of energy in order to feed their growing economies. Ensuring the security of the sea lanes over which these energy resources are transported is in the vital interest of both.³⁰ An additional factor contributing to cooperation over certain transnational matters—such as the environment, trade talks and energy—is their opposition to the united stand taken by developed, Western nations with many of whom both have had painful colonial memories as well.^{31,32,33}

Seventh, neither nation has ever chosen to directly intervene militarily in the other's affairs, notwithstanding the risk that both their national interests have occasionally been exposed to. Consider for instance the

mutual restraint exercised by both nations in their abstention from interfering in each other's domestic affairs despite having had great opportunities to do so. Issues like the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan refugee population's presence within Indian territory and China's reportedly extensive support of the left-wing insurgency (Naxalism), labeled by a former Indian Prime Minister as the “greatest threat to India's internal security”, could have wreaked havoc in their relations had the two countries adopted an aggressive stance.^{34,35} Vis-a-vis Pakistan, for nations that officially describe their relationship as being, “Higher than mountains, deeper than oceans, sweeter than honey, stronger than steel and dearer than eyesight”³⁶—what stands out starkly is the fact that China has never come to Pakistan's aid militarily in a war with India. This includes the 1971 War, when India posed an existential threat to Pakistan-liberated East Pakistan, making way for the rise of the nation of Bangladesh. Pakistan's 1999 Kargil misadventure with India saw Beijing adopt an equidistant stand, similar to its take on Kashmir where Beijing no longer insists on adherence to the original UN resolution on Kashmir (declaring that it should be settled bilaterally).³⁷ India, for its part, has chosen not to provide nuclear arms to one of China's many neighbours (most noticeably, Vietnam) despite China having had no qualms in aiding Pakistan in acquiring nuclear capability.

An eighth reason why the Sino-Indian dynamic ought not to plummet to a more confrontational wavelength relates to the principal security threats facing both nations. In the contemporary strategic environment, India and China have no directly contradictory interests with their respective spheres of influence being oriented in the principally opposite directions. To find the issues central to Indian foreign policy concerns, one needs to look no farther than South Asia and the Indian Ocean. From the security of sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean to

detering Pakistan, maintaining a stronghold over Jammu & Kashmir, and checking the growth of radical Islamist groups in Afghanistan and Bangladesh, India's focus remains internal. The central area of concern for China, by contrast, is North East Asia. Preventing Taiwanese independence, avoiding a new Korean war and ensuring the fulfillment of its maritime territorial claims (in the background of heightened US local presence) are China's foreign-policy priorities.³⁸ China's military acquisition patterns and force posture also demonstrate this bias towards East Asia as it pursues its force modernisations with a key focus on developing Anti Access & Area Denial capabilities. China's increasing ability to project its military power at longer ranges is evident from the massive stockpile of advanced intermediate and medium-range conventional ballistic missiles that it has acquired, along with cruise missiles, counter space weapons and offensive cyber abilities.³⁹ All these efforts are clearly being undertaken with an eye on the United States as the long-term, strategic competitor.

The Perils in the Relationship

The strains in Sino-Indian relationship flow from many sources. Taking a macroscopic view, one can identify the competing trends of nationalism-fuelled disputes being pursued with newly acquired military capabilities being in conflict with increasing levels of integration and globalisation. China is approaching a stage where its post-1978 social contract with its people—rooted in the exchange of growth for stability—is nearing an end due to a palpable economic slowdown.⁴⁰ The search by China's elites for alternate means by which to foster the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party may happen by a reversion to previously tried and tested principles, or else, something entirely new. The fact is that China's vigorous pursuit of its core territorial interests,⁴¹

as it rouses nationalistic passions, are increasingly predicated in the citizenry's desire for China to claim its proverbial rightful place in the sun.⁴² Whichever path the CCP takes, the possibility that this switchover would be a tumultuous one can result in dangerously escalatory measures being taken by the CCP along its borders in an attempt to tap into nationalistic passions. The fact that, as compared to India, the Chinese economy is very closely linked to, and integrated with, its East Asian neighbours—with whom the volume of its trade relations is yet to even surpass Taiwanese-China levels—cannot be overlooked. It is true that China shares a lot of emotional historical baggage with its East Asian neighbours and greater capital can be extracted through the use of aggressive provocations here than with India. The very fact, though, that makes this a good idea is also its weakness, as escalation in such situations can be rapid and a drawdown, tougher. Further, China's limited economic ties with India make bearing the after-effects of a border conflict much easier to weather than with its eastern neighbours.

The second cause for their strained relationship—one that is more firmly based in history and contemporary reality than future gazing—is the question of Tibet.⁴³ China has always resented India's grant of refuge to the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader, who formed a government-in-exile in India in 1959. There have been sparrings recently over the question of his successor.^{44, 45} Even if China were to find, and indoctrinate, a new Dalai Lama, Tibetans would regard him as having succeeded only to the religious role and not the political one which would continue to remain with the elected leader, Lobsang Songay, or whoever succeeds him.⁴⁶ Long a buffer zone between the two, China's occupation of Tibet would not have been a cause of concern for India in another historical epoch. In the modern era, however, with what Kaplan calls the “collapse of distance brought about by the advance of military

technology”,⁴⁷ China's occupation of Tibet brings the immensely populated northern Indian plains (the Gangetic valley) within range of Chinese air and missile forces. There is the argument that Xinjiang, Manchuria, Inner Mongolia and Tibet, have constituted the historical buffer regions (at times when China was strong) protecting the Han-dominated Chinese heartland. In this light, China's takeover of Tibet in 1951 permanently secured China from threats emanating from India's direction by denying to India the possibility of ever establishing a base of operations in the Tibetan Plateau. This could be construed as a defensive measure as, denied the same, waging multidivisional warfare across the Himalayas indeed becomes a highly remote possibility.⁴⁸ However, China's massive logistical buildup and development of infrastructure in the region grants it impressive capabilities with regard to a rapid deployment of troops. Existing troops in the region are in a state of heightened preparedness and have regularly taken part in military exercises aimed at capturing mountain passes.^{49, 50} This is disturbing, for as K.M Pannikar notes, no mountain range is a perfect barrier against invasion and a determined enemy with the backing of resources of a powerfully organised state, can traverse even great mountain ranges. India's western frontier has seen the Hindukush mountains being breached repeatedly whenever Afghanistan and Central Asia were organised as powerful states. The fact that the Himalayas have not been penetrated by an invading force is not due to a lack of passes opening into India but simply because the Tibetan plateau has never in the past been organised as a military state.⁵¹

The third reason flows from the second and relates to the short war fought by India and China in 1962 over contested land borders; these disputes remain to this day.⁵² China's occupation of Tibet was resisted by India, with everything from diplomatic protests to appeasement, and

eventually by supporting armed Tibetan resistance—all of which failed.⁵³ The 1950s were marked by a steady deterioration in Indian military capabilities even as mistrust between India and China increased primarily due to the Tibetan issue and a fragile international environment for Beijing. Then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's jingoistic command in 1962 to ill-prepared troops to evict Chinese troops from Indian claimed territory triggered a Chinese response. The Indians, believing China's predominant concerns to lie in the eastern front with the US and Taiwan, failed to consider that the use of force was even an option for the Chinese.⁵⁴ The humiliating defeat inflicted by China on India in 1962, followed by their unilateral withdrawal, inflicted a trauma that is still felt in India over five decades later.⁵⁵ Continued transgressions across borders have continued to needle India, as well as acts of cartographic aggression and provocative actions by China. India is well aware of the fact that China has settled all its land border disputes with its neighbours, with the exception of the Indian and Bhutanese borders. Keeping alive the border dispute as a measure to encourage India's so-called 'good behaviour' is not going to help China's cause of winning any allies in India.⁵⁶

The fourth factor responsible for troubled Sino-Indian relations has been the exceptionally close Sino-Pakistani relationship. No nation has ever proved to cause more consternation for India than Pakistan, with whom India has fought more than one war: in 1947-48; 1965; and 1971. There are other smaller conflicts, most significant of which are the Siachen and the Kargil conflict. The very close Pakistan-China relationship has been construed in India as China's attempt to keep India pinned down on two fronts and hinder its rise as a great power.⁵⁷ The biggest, most intractable roadblock to better relations and a sign of China's bad faith has been the supply of nuclear weapons to Pakistan by China.

As then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee said on the eve of India becoming a nuclear armed state: *“We have an overt nuclear weapons state [China] on our borders...an atmosphere of distrust persists, mainly due to the unresolved border problem. To add to the distrust, that country has materially helped another neighbour of ours [Pakistan] to become a covert nuclear weapons state.”*⁵⁸

The acquisition of nuclear weapons by Pakistan gave it a shield from behind which it has unleashed a campaign of asymmetrical warfare against India over the past two decades, aiming to make it “bleed to death.” The fifth irritant in Sino-Indian relations is the post-1962 Indian perception that all Chinese activities south of the Himalayas are guided by the desire to balance it. China, in turn, has criticised India's 'hegemony' and attempts to limit its influence in the region.⁵⁹ Northwards, China's encirclement is deemed to begin with its growing influence in the post-Soviet-Union Central Asia. Its threat has extended southwards through its military links with Bangladesh and Myanmar and its all-weather friendship with Pakistan (whom, as stated earlier, it aided in acquiring nuclear weapons capability as well).⁶⁰ China's outreach to Nepal and Sri Lanka—two nations where its reach and influence has traditionally been weak vis-a-vis India—is a cause of concern for New Delhi.⁶¹

Sixth, today both nations are engaged in a shadow rivalry across different theatres the world over. China's engagement from Southeast Asia⁶² to Central Asia,⁶³ the Middle East,⁶⁴ and Africa^{65, 66} greatly exceeds that of India, a fact that India recognises as well. This is something that India is now correcting with various strategies, the clearest example of which is its Look East Policy⁶⁷ which India aims to eventually transform into a Move East⁶⁸ / Act East Policy.⁶⁹ Just beyond South Asia, the Indian Ocean is an arena where rivalry between the two nations is beginning to pan out as China obsesses over its Malacca Dilemma. China fears a future

conflict where India cuts off its energy supplies, the bulk of which traverse the Indian Ocean and have to pass through the Straits of Malacca to reach China. China's talks with Thailand about building a canal across the Isthmus of Kra, so as to directly link the South China Sea with the Bay of Bengal, is a consequence of this trend.⁷⁰ India has bitterly resented China's intrusion into a region that it considers as falling within its own sphere of influence as evident in the large audience to the theory about a Chinese 'string of pearls' in the Indian Ocean.^{71, 72} China's re-casting of the network of ports and facilities it has built in the region in light of its much-trumped Maritime Silk Road⁷³ has seen India counter with Project Mausam, aiming to revive its own ancient maritime routes and cultural linkages in the region,⁷⁴ even as its growing forging of external security ties have led some to speculate as to the emergence of an Indian 'necklace of diamonds' to counter China.⁷⁵

The seventh source of concern for India is the dissonance between China's stated positions and its actual practice in the pursuit and conduct of its foreign policy and diplomacy. India has not bought on to China's narrative of a peaceful rise that does not pose a threat to anyone and is concerned by the dichotomy between China's proclamations and actual state practice. John Garver, for instance, makes a distinction between *gonkai* (openly disseminated) and *neibu* (closed) publications in China with *gonkai* (the sources used to inform the world at large) serving the role of mobilising support for official policies. Open sources consistently resonate with the theme that there are no legitimate grounds for India to be concerned with growing Chinese influence and power. The perception of India's rise as a favourable one amongst Chinese scholars is an observation that has been made by other commentators as well.⁷⁶ That said, it is considered quite probable that closed sources convey a much more realistic 'conflict-oriented' analysis, especially in

light of the fact that actual Chinese state practice does not seem to be informed by the flowery version of Sino-Indian relations.⁷⁷

Eighth, competition in the economic realm has the potential to be a major spoiler for Sino-Indian relations. It is true that India and China do not presently consider each other as economic rivals; that being said, there are many outstanding issues in their relationship. India's ballooning trade deficit with China,⁷⁸ for example, has been a cause of concern for some time now. Security concerns have also led India to limit Chinese investment in Indian telecommunications, China's bids in Mumbai and Vizhinjam for port facilities have been rejected and Chinese migrant workers are required to fulfill more stringent visa requirements.

Accusations by India—such as that of China dumping goods in Indian markets and, in turn, causing the depression of local prices—make the prospect of an India-China free trade agreement suspect. Whilst the Indian economy has traditionally excelled in the services sector, China has dominated the manufacturing component. With the steady diversification of economies and exports, such complementarity is expected to experience a decline; this, in turn, could lead to enhanced competition.⁷⁹ The tremendous demand for increased energy in both these nations has the scope to expand from mere economic discomfort and venture into the arena of power politics. Widespread Chinese investment in far-flung areas, which has been mirrored to an extent by India, presages mercantilist competition over energy and raw materials which could fuel rivalry between the two.⁸⁰

Harmonising Competing Narratives of Sino-Indian Relations

An examination of the two varying narratives of the trajectory that can be taken by Sino-Indian relations tends to reveal more questions than

answers. Nonetheless, it is possible to narrow down upon the broad trends animating their interactions and the impulses that propel these trends.

Following Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping's opening up of his nation to the world, China's external outlook has been shaped, for the larger part of the last four decades, by its need to project its ascent as the 'peaceful development of China.' The Chinese leadership considers the time frame up till 2020 as a strategic opportunity for them in which they can develop their economy to become "relatively well-off."⁸¹ The problem of maintaining state legitimacy in a non-democratic system was accomplished by engineering exponential economic growth via the strategy of extensive growth on the backs of the largest pool of young workers in the world. The channeling of household savings through a state-dominated banking system at exceptionally low interest rates—so as to finance the creation of a manufacturing assembly and processing base for the OECD world—is what has enabled China's rise as an export-oriented economy. The creation of a symbiotic relationship between itself and the US (along with the larger West) meant that it ruled out the possibility of an existential military threat emanating from the world's leading military powers. It is not therefore in China's interests to allow India to become South Asia's regional hegemon: following the fall of the former USSR, India remains the only Asian continental rival that can balance China.

Even if India were not to balance China militarily, the existence of India in the form that it is presently constituted—'democratic, prosperous and successful'—is a hindrance to China's attempts geared towards creating a Sino-Centric international order.⁸² As Amartya Sen has sharply pointed out, India's challenge to China's 'monolithic self centeredness has historical precedent: "...some Chinese commentators felt threatened not only by

the dilution of China's centrality, but-worse by the tendency of some Buddhists to take India to actually be more central than China.'⁸³ As of today, China's southern boundary is firmly anchored in Tibet, whose assimilation into China had been begrudgingly accepted by India in the past as the inevitable cost of improved relations between the two. China's continued push for close military ties with India's neighbours despite this fact baffles Indians and strengthens the lobby viewing Sino-Indian relations in zero-sum terms. Prof. Harsh V. Pant concurs that while China's overriding focus has been on ensuring its socioeconomic development, what is also true is that it has actively pursued a strategy of preventing the rise of other regional powers.⁸⁴ A situation where China has a military conflict with or is sucked into a military conflict of India with its neighbours is not the object of Chinese foreign policy. However, enhancing the autonomy of India's smaller neighbours is very much a desired objective of China's.⁸⁵

Sustained economic growth is an issue of national survival for Beijing. Moreover, an India that is free of land-based threats can, albeit theoretically, accrete sufficient naval might so as to threaten China mortally by interdicting the seaborne energy supplies that power China's economic growth.⁸⁶ That India could use the Andaman Islands as a metal chain to block the Straits of Malacca's western approaches is a worst-case scenario that keeps China's strategists up at night.^{87, 88} That said, naval blockades are lengthy and complicated operations. A temporary Indian denial to Beijing of sea routes would not pose such long-term complications to China as would a permanent loss of Indian territory in Arunachal Pradesh to India. According to one school of thought, given China's growing petroleum reserves and new energy linkages with Russia and Central Asia, the value assigned by China to its Indian Ocean Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) will decline over time.⁸⁹ This may be one of the reasons why China will not bury its border dispute with

India and give away the greatest leverage it has on its hands if it wishes to moderate India's movements.

It is this very issue which makes incredulous, the assertion that both nations do not constitute the principal security threat to each other. Such an assertion may hold true for China; however, China has not been described in flattering terms at all. As a former Indian foreign secretary remarked, “Pakistan is just an enemy, China is the adversary.”⁹⁰ Jaswant Singh, a former Minister of External Affairs of India, described China as “the principal variable in the calculus of India's foreign and defence policy.”⁹¹ For his part, George Fernandes, a former Indian defence minister during his term had declared: “China is potential threat number one...China is and is likely to remain the primary security challenge to India in the medium and long term.”⁹²

Following the landslide victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led alliance in the 2014 general elections, whether the stronghanded, technocratic Indian Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi, will take a tougher stand against China or draw closer to it has been cause for much speculation. The one aspect of his foreign policy that is abundantly clear is that the economy matters first to Modi.⁹³ Given the convergence of economic interests that India and China are experiencing at present, Mr. Modi has the chance to structurally alter a nation whose foreign policy has been characterised more by continuity rather than change, absolutely irrelevant of the party in power.⁹⁴ As noted in this paper, following the 2008 financial crisis, overall trends in the international political economy make it more likely that Sino-Indian relations will take an upward swing in the longer run, even as the short - to mid-term scenarios involve heightened risk between the two.

Charting a Course for the Future

The phrase, 'Tao Guang Yang Hui' (better known as the 24-character guideline)⁹⁵ coined by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, roughly translated into “Hide brightness, nourish obscurity,”⁹⁶ is very instructive with regard to appreciating how China's soft projection of itself until recently was consistent with its narrative of a peaceful rise as a world power. Such an approach to regional affairs underlined China's recognition of the fact that the United States was the hegemonic power in the Asia Pacific and that this was not necessarily bad for China's interests. US presence is no doubt something that China would like to do well without; China cannot simply wish it away, however. A US presence in the region that made regional states more comfortable with China's rise was desirable to the extent that it did not snowball into an active effort aimed at containing China.⁹⁷ Such a policy may be considered a validation of Deng Xiaoping's much favoured adage of “hide our capabilities and bide our time.”⁹⁸ Recent years though have seen a decided change in China's external behaviour as some commentators herald the rise of a more assertive China; they postulate that China is no longer abiding by Xiaoping's dictum.⁹⁹ Whether or not the categorisation of China's behaviour as newly assertive is factually correct is in itself contested; what is not debated is that such a categorisation has contributed to the 'security dilemma' and made an impact in domestic politics as well, which has led, in turn, to a narrowing of public discourse.¹⁰⁰ Today, a financially troubled America emerging from a decade-long immersion in fighting Islamist insurgencies is acutely aware of the limits of US power. With US credibility being questioned everywhere—from the Middle East (Syria) to Europe (Russia's revanchist behaviour in Ukraine)—it is expected that, over time, America will grow relatively weaker and China, stronger, both on and off the battlefields.¹⁰¹

How is the US-China dynamic relevant to India-China relations? Should Beijing, say stave off its potential threats to the East it would have little reason to give Delhi what it desires as it would then have abundant resources to devote southwards. Today, Indo-US interests may align with respect to China but they do not yet coincide.¹⁰² With no history of non-UN-mandated force deployments outside the subcontinent, it is evident that India does not believe the military dimension to be a mandatory element in strategic partnerships.¹⁰³ Consequently, India and the US could develop a consensus on the ends but not necessarily the means as the US will, for instance, find few buyers in India for a regional security arrangement that is exclusivist in nature.¹⁰⁴ Even though both India and China wish for a stable Indo-Pacific region, differing perceptions of the role that should be played in the region by external powers (i.e., the United States) is a clear point of divergence between the two.¹⁰⁵ The rapidly improving US-India relationship has therefore made Sino-Indian rapprochement a pressing priority for China^{106, 107, 108} since China is well aware that a US-centric Asian order (improbable as it is) would be more acceptable to India than a Sino-centric one.

The fact is that China knows India to be a potential competitor and whether today's claims become tomorrow's demands is not something that can be ruled out.¹⁰⁹ Sino-Indian relations, should they progress from where they presently stand, may well move along the trajectory of competitive coexistence.¹¹⁰ As to the possibility of it ever shifting to the plane of strategic rivalry is dependent on variables over which Beijing and New Delhi may have influence but not absolute control. China's principal security concerns lie eastwards, and not south, which is why its rise is more in the nature of a challenge and less of a threat to India's security. However, intentions can change in the long term and China's capabilities are indeed formidable. Internal instability in China or a

dramatic change in the international balance of power could result in situations where China's capabilities constitute a grave threat to India (say a situation where unreasonable claims are made of India regarding Tibet or the Sino-Indian border, thus precipitating conflict).¹¹¹ The path taken by Sino-Indian relations in this decade then will set the tone and pace for their relationship (be it the cooperative or competitive kind) well into the 21st century.

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Observer Research Foundation
20, Rouse Avenue, New Delhi-110 002
Email: orf@orfonline.org
Phone: +91-11-43520020 Fax: +91-11-43520003
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