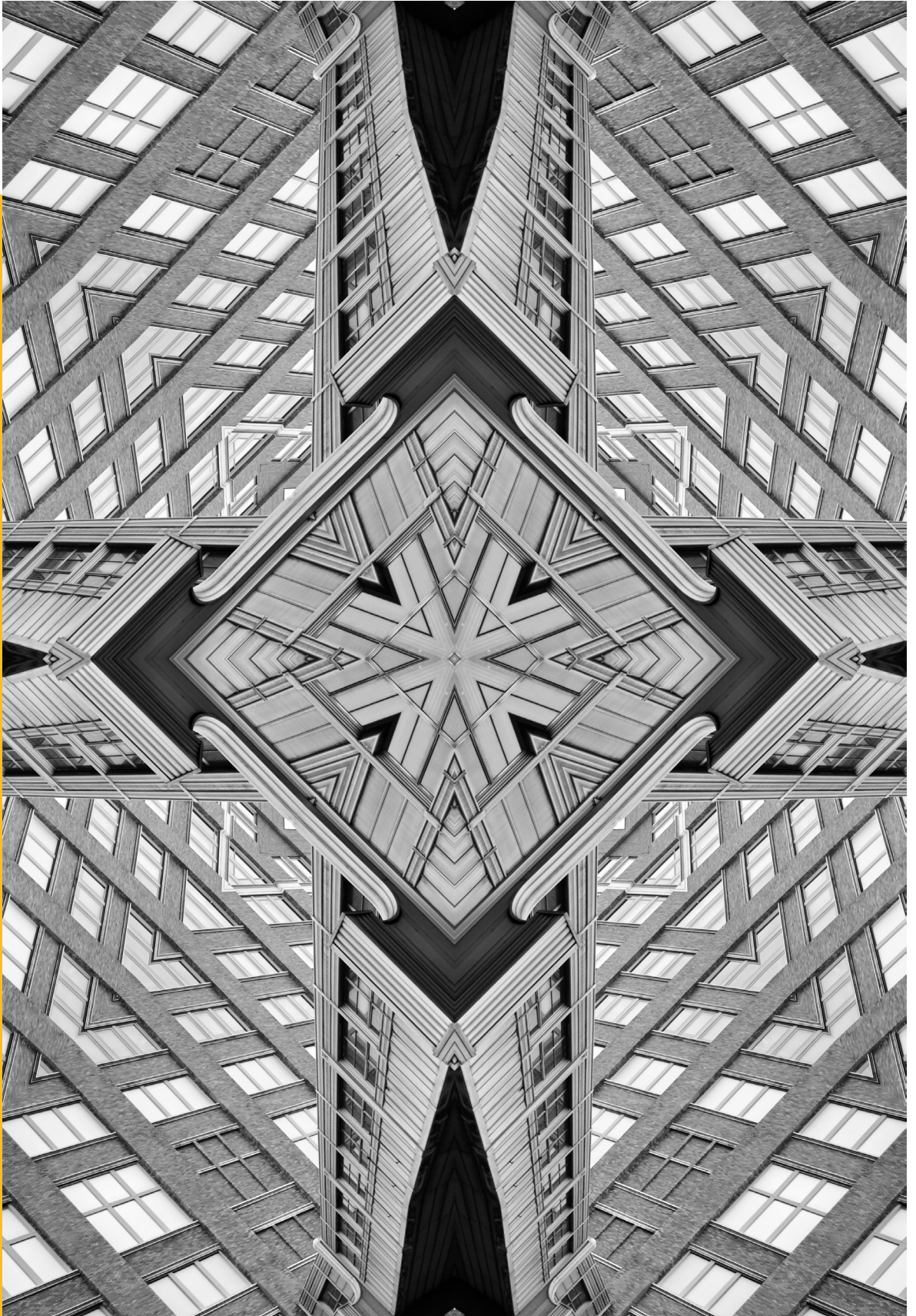


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China's Two-Front Conundrum: A Perspective on the India- China Border Situation

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Abstract

China's actions in Ladakh since 2020 are in violation of common understandings and have brought the focus of bilateral relationship back to the issue of the border. This paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of China's behaviour along the India-China border by exploring a fresh perspective that explains the instability along the border as a function of China's two-front conundrum. It makes a historical account of past events to argue that China's two-front threat perception is not new. The paper finds a correlation between China's insecurity around a two-front threat and a rise in the tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). It concludes that Beijing has indeed used instability along the LAC as a tool to manage its two-front threat.

A ‘two-front conundrum’ can be understood as a security challenge that arises when a country faces threats from adversaries from two sides. The challenge is compounded if the adversaries collude to contain their common enemy and enforce a pincer movement. A crucial national security concern for India has been the prospect of such a two-front war with its antagonistic neighbours, China and Pakistan. In January 2020, India’s then army chief Gen. M.M. Naravane had alluded to such a possibility at a press conference;¹ a few months later, it was reiterated by former Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) Gen. Bipin Rawat, while speaking at the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum.²

India has been cautious to prevent such a situation. In the past, whenever it was deemed essential to undertake stringent measures on one front, India has tried to ensure that the other front stays under control. During the China-India war of 1962, for instance, India approached the United States to dissuade Pakistan from taking advantage of India’s situation and opening a second front.³ Later in 1971, when India intervened in East Pakistan to assist the *Mukti Bahini* (leading to the formation of Bangladesh as a separate country), it did so only after ensuring that China’s interference would be minimal, if not altogether eliminated. India signed the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation⁴ with the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) as insurance against any third-party interference. It also launched operations in December 1971 when winter had set in, making Chinese intervention difficult.

The two-front threat resurfaced in 2020, when Pakistan committed violations of its 2003 ceasefire agreement with India,⁵ amidst the standoff between India and China in Ladakh that began in April 2020. As the face-off with the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) threatened to turn into a protracted stalemate, India concluded a fresh ceasefire agreement with Pakistan in February 2021.⁶

India’s strategic decisions have historically taken into consideration the possibility of such a simultaneous confrontation. Indian scholarship too, has given the subject necessary attention.

China has similar fears. For over a decade beginning in the late 1950s, China has suspected it could face a two-front challenge—from its east (along the Pacific front) as well as from its southwest (along the Himalayan front). The threat began to subside around the 1970s, following the growing

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divergence between India and the US, and the US-China convergence—a result of the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s—in 1971. In more recent years, China’s perception of the threat has resurfaced due to the deepening of India-US strategic convergence since 2008, a relationship it perceives as aimed at countering and containing its rise.

This paper attempts to understand the China-India border conflict, starting in 1959 and continuing into the current decade—including the 2020 crisis in Ladakh—through the lens of China’s two-front conundrum. It investigates whether China has strategically used the border question to redress its own two-front challenge. It finds that Chinese violations along the India-China border have increased in parallel to China’s rising threat perception of a two-front challenge. It postulates that, in the decade following 1959, China, advertently or not, exploited India’s own insecurity about facing a two-front challenge to outsource its own two-front conundrum to the latter. It views the border clashes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the decade following 2010 as an attempt to outsource the re-emerging two-front challenge that China perceives. In doing so, the paper provides an alternative theory to analyse Chinese aggression in Ladakh in 2020.

Apart from its threat assessment, China’s view of its military capability has acted as another determinant in its use of instability along the border as a tool to redress its two-front challenge. India’s relative lack of capacity to confront a two-front challenge further facilitates this approach. China not only perceives the threat as real and its capability as sufficient, but also India’s capacity to respond as limited, thereby encouraging it to indulge in border politics. This paper thus recommends that India take into account China’s two-front situation in framing its China policy and also find an answer to its own two-front problem.

The paper does not suggest that every crisis along the border be viewed as part of China’s two-front management strategy. Its initiation of border tensions may also have other tactical or strategic objectives.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first traces the origin of China’s insecurity in the 1950s and analyses tensions along the India-China border till the late 1960s. The second part discusses the resurgence of China’s threat perception since 2008 and the parallel rise in border tensions. The third section collates the findings of the two previous sections and suggests a way forward for India.

The Emergence of China's Two-Front Conundrum

China under the Communist Party of China (CPC) first grew anxious about a developing two-front threat in the early 1950s. Ever since the CPC chased the Guomindang (GMD) nationalist government to Formosa (now Taiwan) in 1949, China feared a US-backed GMD invasion from the east. On its western front along the Himalayas, China was wary of Indian interference in Tibet and accused it of colluding with the US to instigate subversive and secessionist tendencies.⁷ Mao Zedong suspected India's prime minister at that time, Jawaharlal Nehru, to be an American loyalist and India as belonging to the US-led imperialist camp.⁸ India's former foreign secretary, Vijay Gokhale notes that China believed India lacked any independent agency.⁹ These considerations would have informed China's two-front conundrum. Gokhale also says "the core of China's India policy was to deter India from becoming a US-camp follower,"¹⁰ which could be extrapolated to argue that China looked at US-India proximity with concern.

Chinese vulnerability to a two-front situation was acknowledged by Pan Tsuli, then Chinese ambassador to India, in his demarche of 16 May 1959 to the Indian Foreign Secretary. Referring to the US, he wrote that "the enemy of the Chinese people lies in the East" with "many military bases in Taiwan, in South Korea, Japan and in the Philippines...all directed against China."¹¹ He added, "China's main attention and policy of struggle are directed to the east, to the west Pacific region...and not to India." He noted that India, unlike some other South Asian and Southeast Asian countries, had not joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and thus, was "not an opponent" and that "China will not be so foolish as to antagonise the United States in the east and again to antagonize India in the west." He concluded with a subtle warning to India: "It seems to us that you too cannot have two fronts. Is it not so? If it is, here lies the meeting point of our two sides."¹²

Implicit in the note was China's perception of a two-front threat—i.e., primarily a charged Pacific front as well as a volatile Tibet, where the 'secessionist forces' were being "aided" by India. The disputed border between India and Tibet formed an additional factor in the scheme of an active front with India. To a great extent, an unstable border between India

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and China was also a function of India's involvement in Tibet as seen by China. Certainly, an insurgent Tibet supported by India and a border that India disputed, made for an insecure China. Even today, China's border aggression is to some extent an effort to prevent India's involvement in Tibet. The two-front situation for China in the 1950s and 1960s did not emanate from the disputed border alone but also from India's potential to exploit China's vulnerability in Tibet.

The note by Pan Tsuli, besides being an oblique admission of an imminent two-front situation, also seems to have been China's first attempt to find a way out of the strategic triangulation that both India and China faced.¹³ China issued a veiled threat to caution India of a two-front situation to pull itself out of a similar situation. India's reply was rather harsh. Nehru, in a draft letter, called the Chinese remarks 'objectionable' and 'discourteous'.¹⁴ India's rebuff, coupled with the subsequent worsening of China-India relations over Tibet, and the two countries' inability to reach a solution on the border question, further intensified Chinese suspicion of India's intent.

China's fear of a two-front situation also became apparent in the run-up to the 1962 war with India. Wang Bingnan, Chinese ambassador to Poland in 1962, noted in his memoirs that on 23 June 1962, he expressed his fear of a US-supported Taiwanese invasion of China to his US counterpart, John Cabot.¹⁵ Cabot, after speaking to the US State Department, assured Wang that "the US government has no intention of supporting a GRC^a (Taiwan) attack on the mainland in existing circumstances."¹⁶ Wang's memoirs claim that he could not "believe his ears" and requested Cabot to reconfirm it, which Cabot did.¹⁷ China thus managed to obtain an assurance of non-aggression on its eastern front from the US in 1962. Wang further recalls that the assurance was crucial to the decision to launch the war against India.¹⁸ Even so, China timed the attack on India in the short window available during the Cuban missile crisis when the two superpowers—the US and the USSR—were engaged in a nuclear showdown. It conveniently declared a ceasefire soon after the Cuban crisis ended.

a The Goumindang government in Taiwan was also called the Government of the Republic of China (GRC) though all it controlled of China was the island of Taiwan.

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The period of heightened Chinese anxiety around the two-front threat in the 1950-60s also saw a spike in clashes along the India-China border. It was the most unstable and volatile period in the history of India-China relations. In 1955-56, there were a large number of Chinese incursions which India protested.¹⁹ In July 1958, the PLA forcibly occupied the Khurnak Fort in eastern Ladakh. In September, it detained an Indian patrol party in Ladakh's Aksai Chin for nearly five weeks.²⁰ There were also incursions in the eastern and middle sectors such as Lohit (Arunachal Pradesh), Laphthal and Sangch Malla (Uttarakhand.)²¹

India's timid response to these early aggressions appears to have emboldened China. The first violent border clash occurred in Longju in August 1959 when two Indian soldiers were killed.²² This was followed by another deadly incident in October the same year when several Indian police personnel on patrol duty were killed and a few taken prisoners near the Kongka Pass.²³ The prisoners, along with the bodies of the dead, would not be released until a month later.²⁴

It is worth noting that the border turned volatile immediately after the subtle threat contained in Pan Tzuli's May 1959 demarche. With the USSR reprimanding it for its border action,²⁵ China found itself isolated, and briefly paused its hostility. The changed Chinese attitude culminated in 1960 in a proposal from then Prime Minister, Zhou Enlai—which India rejected—²⁶ that China would recognise India's sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh^b if India conceded Ladakh's Aksai Chin. It showed that China's capability assessment was an additional determinant in its decision on whether to shun hostility or resort to it.

The border issue, however, remained unresolved and so did the Chinese insecurity around the two-front threat. The period of restraint ended soon thereafter and China prepared to wage a war against India. It found a short window of opportunity during the Cuban missile crisis^c of October-November 1962. Its attack is popularly believed to be a response to India's

b It was then called North East Frontier Agency (NEFA).

c The Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 began with a US spy plane secretly photographing nuclear missiles the USSR was stocking in Cuba, which had seen a communist takeover in January 1959. The US imposed a naval quarantine around Cuba preventing the USSR from bringing in any more missiles. The USSR eventually agreed to withdraw its missiles, while the US promised not to invade Cuba.

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perceived interference in Tibet.²⁷ However, it can also be viewed as CPC Chairman Mao Zedong's attempt to consolidate his power following the chaos unleashed by his blunders during the Great Leap Forward (1958-61).^{28,d} It is also possible that the war was waged to remind India of its own two-front challenge.

Even if managing its two-front situation was not one of China's intended objectives for launching the war, it inadvertently succeeded in doing so. Besides being caught off-guard by the aggression, India also realised the possibility of a simultaneous threat from two fronts. Considerations of a situation where India might have to confront two of its adversaries simultaneously would permeate its security decisions for decades thereafter.²⁹

India's relative incapacity to respond to a two-front challenge has made it highly cautious in its approach to China, always mindful of Chinese sensitivities to avoid triggering another border crisis. To be sure, though, Nehru's caution flowed not from a threat perception, but out of his admiration of China and the desire to carve a lasting partnership. He was confident that China would not launch a war with India,³⁰ describing the 1959 Longju incident as 'minor'.³¹ It was this confidence that led to his insistence on retaining the McMahon line^e as the India-Tibet border, even as China made its reservations about this known. He also sanctioned the 'Forward Policy' requiring the occupation of frontier posts along the Indo-Tibet border, but without building enough operational or logistic support needed to hold on to them if attacked.³²

After the war, Nehru assured then US President John F. Kennedy that India would not take any action to provoke China.³³ This was evident in the policy adopted by New Delhi towards troop deployment and border infrastructure along the LAC. Lt Gen (Retd.) H.S. Panag, former General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C), Northern Command, has pointed out that India's military debacle was such that the political leadership did not "dare to deploy our army on the LAC for the next 24

d China's Great Leap Forward, begun in 1958, was an effort to accelerate economic development by collectivising agriculture and introducing modern methods while also promoting rural industrialisation. The attempt to achieve 'too much too soon' had disastrous consequences leading to mass starvation, and was abandoned in 1961.

e The McMahon Line forms India's boundary with Tibet in the Eastern sector of the LAC. It was an outcome of the Simla Convention, 1914 which was attended by representatives of the British, China and Tibet. The Chinese objected to the delineation of the border and did not sign the final agreement.

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years.”³⁴ It was a complete breakaway from Nehru’s audacious Forward Policy of 1961. Nor was border infrastructure development given much attention owing to a flawed deterrent policy against Chinese aggression. Former Defence Minister A.K. Antony admitted in 2010 that successive governments had neglected infrastructure development along the LAC believing that inaccessibility due to poor infrastructure would deter Chinese advance.³⁵ Given China’s two-front sensitivities, it is fair to argue that they assessed the impact of the war from this viewpoint. The war could have worsened China’s challenge, putting India on the offensive. Yet, India was not prepared to take a hard position along the LAC.

China sensed another opportunity during the India-Pakistan war of 1965. It accused India of violating the Sikkim-Tibet border by maintaining military installations on the Tibetan side, and issued it an ultimatum to withdraw; it also charged India with abducting 59 Chinese yaks.³⁶ On 19 September 1965, while the India-Pakistan war was underway, the PLA kidnapped and killed three Indian soldiers from across the LAC near Tsaskur in Ladakh.³⁷ The timing could not be missed: it sought to remind India of its vulnerability to the two-front situation. India did not escalate the matter as it could not afford to ignite a second front. As it was, the China-Pakistan border settlement agreement two years before in March 1963, whereby Pakistan ceded the Shaksgam Valley to China, had reinforced India’s fears of collusion between the two hostile neighbours. That India chose to abide by China’s ultimatum on the ceasefire during the 1965 war suggests that the latter’s manoeuvres succeeded in influencing the former’s decision.³⁸

Two years later, in September-October 1967, China again engaged in border skirmishes with Indian troops in Nathu La and Cho La in Sikkim.^f According to some estimates, the PLA lost 300 soldiers in those incidents, while India suffered 80 casualties.³⁹ Thus, from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s, China’s heightened two-front threat perception coincided with recurrent border clashes with India. They served to remind India of its vulnerability to a two-front situation, putting on it the onus of maintaining a stable and quiet border.

f The Nathu La conflict erupted following attempts by Indian troops to erect a border fence there after repeated incursions by the PLA. The Chinese objected, leading to heated exchanges, after which they attacked with mortars and artillery. China launched another offensive at Cho La, forcing India to retaliate.

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Fearful of provoking China, India did not assert its claim on territories on its own side of the border, nor did it upgrade infrastructure along the border. That is why recent Indian efforts to do so have piqued Chinese anxiety and insecurity.⁴⁰

As the 1960s ended, the US softened its approach towards China thereby attenuating the latter's two-front challenge. In 1971, the US opened up to China, allowing for China's entry into the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and displacing the Republic of China (Taiwan). The US-China normalisation efforts reached full fruition in 1979, when the two countries recognised each other and established diplomatic relations. At the same time, the growing strategic divergence between India and the US under Richard Nixon's presidency helped calm China's insecurity.

A new challenge came for China in the 1970s from a different front: the Soviet Union. Its problem was compounded by the increasing strategic convergence between the USSR and India, culminating in their signing of a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in August 1971. Mao feared the Soviets and the Indians were uniting against China.⁴¹ Unlike in the 1950s-60s, this development did not coincide with further clashes along the India-China border. The Chinese assessment of their restrained capability, even as they faced a real threat, might have dissuaded them from launching strikes against India. India and the Soviets being treaty allies, any escalation would have obliged the latter to assist the former. China found it prudent to not repeat its past actions.

Second, while China's relations with the US began to improve and the threat of a US-backed Taiwanese invasion dissolved after 1971, the progress on US-China relations briefly stalled after Nixon's exit from the presidency, leaving China less confident. Lastly, China had domestic problems in the wake of the chaos unleashed by the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976)^g and the Lin Biao affair (1971)^h which impacted civil-military relations. While Mao's death in 1976 ended the Cultural Revolution, it sparked succession battles and infighting for leadership positions within the CPC, creating political instability until Deng Xiaoping took over in 1978.

g The Cultural Revolution was an attempt to revitalise communism in China by purging Chinese society of whatever capitalist and traditional practices that still remained. Like the Great Leap Forward, it had disastrous, if unintended, consequences.

h Lin Biao was a hero of the Communist victory in the Chinese civil war and the designated deputy of Chairman Mao Zedong, who, however, was killed in a mysterious air crash in 1971. It was subsequently said that he had been plotting a coup against Mao and was branded a traitor.

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For Deng, the economy was the main priority.⁴² To “hide its strengths and bide its time,” as Deng instructed, China needed to stabilise relations with the USSR and India. Normalisation efforts with the USSR began in 1982 and culminated in the visit of Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev to Beijing in 1989; similar steps with India led to then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi also visiting Beijing in 1988. For the next two decades, China managed its relations with all three countries—the US, the Soviet Union (later Russia) and India—fairly well, staving off the two-front challenge.

To be sure, there were isolated border confrontations even during the period following 1970 until 2000, such as those at Tulung La in 1975,ⁱ in the Sumdorong Chu valley in 1986,^j and at Dongzhang in 1999,^k all three of them in Arunachal Pradesh. However, these were too widely spaced out to form any visible pattern and may have been due to other tactical or strategic aims.

i Four Assam Rifles jawans were ambushed and killed by Chinese soldiers at Tulung La on 20 October 1975. China claimed it had fired in self-defence.

j India had resumed patrolling the Sumdorong Chu area in 1981 and built a post there in 1984. On noticing the development, the Chinese resisted and set up camps in the area in 1986, resulting in the standoff which lasted until May 1987.

k In July 1999, China sought to graze animals at a spot in Dongzhang which India claims as its territory. The standoff between Indian and Chinese troops over the matter lasted 87 days.

The Resurgence of China's Insecurity

The end of the Cold War and the following century witnessed the US recalibrate its strategic policy in Asia and tilt towards India. Among various drivers was India's potential as a counterweight to China.⁴³ Consequently, China was concerned over the developing South-Asian security architecture centred around US-India cooperation.⁴⁴

The period around 2008 witnessed two developments that were pivotal to reviving China's two-front insecurity. The first was the conclusion of the India-US Nuclear Cooperation Deal⁴⁵ and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) waiver^{46,1} in 2008. The deal and the consequent waiver were a recognition of India's rising stature as a nuclear state.⁴⁷ It marked a significant geopolitical and geostrategic shift in US foreign policy towards India that paved the way for deeper defence and security cooperation between the two. In addition to recognising India's relevance, the deal was also an attempt towards rebalancing Asia against the backdrop of China's rise.⁴⁸ This development was accompanied by India's 2008 purchase of the US-made transport aircraft that included C-130J and C-17 Globemaster with an eye on carrying out heavy-lift operations near the LAC.

The US's discomfort regarding China's rising influence in the Asia-Pacific was reaffirmed by its unveiling of the 'Pivot to Asia' or 'Asia Rebalance' initiative.⁴⁹ While the success of the initiative itself can be debated, the underlying strategic rationale—countering China's rise—was undisputed. Former Major General of the Chinese PLA, Luo Yuan acknowledged the US's attempts to "encircle" China in Asia as part of the 'Pivot to Asia' initiative.⁵⁰ It was against this backdrop that the deepening of the US-India defence and security cooperation became a concerning development for China.

The second development, also around 2008, was India's increased investment in border infrastructure. The Ministry of Defence's (MoD) annual report for 2009-10 acknowledged the need to upgrade border

1 NSG rules forbid it from providing nuclear supplies to a country which has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). India is not a signatory, calling the treaty discriminatory. The waiver allowed NSG to supply such material to India despite India not having signed the NPT.

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infrastructure,⁵¹ which earlier ministry reports did not refer to.^m The 2011-12 report did the same, also taking cognisance of increasing Chinese capabilities along the LAC.⁵² Projects initiated or completed around this period included activating Advanced Landing Grounds (ALGs) in Fukche and Nyoma in Ladakh in 2008 and 2009, respectively; reactivating the Daulat Beg Oldi airstrip in Ladakh (completed in 2013); sanctioning the setting up of two new mountain divisions; and approving the construction of 15,000 km of road close to the LAC in 10 years beginning 2012.⁵³ The projects were intended to limit, if not neutralise, the advantages that China had owing to its superior logistics facilities near the LAC. Aggressive investments in infrastructure upgrade were intended to allow Indian troops to overcome the tactical disadvantages by reducing their reaction time in event of a transgression, improving their mobility to allow swift transport of heavy equipment, and enabling assertion of territorial claims.

For China, which viewed India's strategic alignment with the US with concern given the deepening US-China rivalry, India's improved capability along the LAC compounded anxieties. China's tactical advantages vis-à-vis India were a deterrence they wished to maintain. But upending this existing equilibrium, in consonance with deepening strategic convergence with the US over China, threatened to not just revive the two-front challenge for China but also the credibility of the threat. Pointing to US-India joint military drills, Lin Minwang, Professor at Fudan University's Institute of International Studies, has warned of the two countries undertaking "joint action against China in the Himalayas."⁵⁴ Lin rued that India has "sacrificed its strategic and defence autonomy to balance the perceived 'China threat',"⁵⁵ also pointing to road construction on the Indian side of the LAC as an irritant in bilateral border relations.⁵⁶ Manoj Joshi, Distinguished Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, agrees that India's focus on border infrastructure, coupled with its growing proximity to the US, are viewed by the Chinese as a merging of threats from a "primary and secondary strategic direction."⁵⁷ These developments also sought to merge the two fronts on a tactical level.

m MoD's 2009-2010 annual report says: "Government of India is fully seized of the security needs of the country as well as the requirement of development of infrastructure in the border areas. Necessary steps have been initiated for the upgradation of our infrastructure... Strategically important infrastructure requirements along the LAC have been identified and are being developed in a phased manner."

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It is equally important to understand China's growing confidence in its own defence capabilities alongside its growing threat perception. A number of China observers suggest that following its emergence as the world's second largest economy after the global financial crisis of 2008, China is shedding its old 'hide and bide' approach, and becoming more inclined to use coercive means to realise its goals.⁵⁸

There has been a sustained rise in incidents of LAC violation by the Chinese PLA since 2008, becoming apparent even as negotiations on the India-US nuclear deal were underway. In 2006, Chinese Ambassador to India Sun Yuxi, in a media interview, claimed the whole of Arunachal Pradesh as part of China.⁵⁹ The statement was surprising, given that just a year earlier in April 2005, India and China had signed an agreement on the guiding principles to solve the boundary dispute and agreed to "safeguard the interests of the settled populations in the border areas."⁶⁰ In May 2007, China refused to issue a visa to an Indian IAS officer hailing from Arunachal Pradesh, saying he was a "Chinese national" and therefore did not require a visa. In the same year, there were over 150 transgressions across the LAC, which increased to 270 in 2008.⁶¹ In November 2009, Chinese soldiers crossed the LAC and stopped a road construction project in Demchok, Ladakh.⁶² In August 2011, Chinese soldiers reportedly used helicopters to land on the Indian side of the LAC and dismantle bunkers.⁶³ Similar instances of LAC violations were reported in 2012.⁶⁴

The subsequent incidents along the LAC grew more serious. On 15 April 2013, ahead of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's India visit, PLA soldiers entered the Depsang plains which abut Ladakh's Daulat Beg Oldi region, 19-km-deep past the LAC, setting up tents and refusing to retreat. They withdrew only after 21 days of intense military and diplomatic effort.⁶⁵ In August that year, a report by India's National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) claimed that following the Chinese manoeuvres in Depsang and nearby areas, India's patrolling rights up to the Depsang Buldge had been hindered, which could lead to a loss of around 640 sq km of territory, and would effectively shift the operational LAC well inside the Indian claim line.⁶⁶ In September 2014, days before President Xi Jinping's visit to India, PLA soldiers attempted to build a road up to Tible near Chumar in southeastern Ladakh, in response

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to an observation post that Indian troops had set up in the same area. (The post had been built to ensure that Chinese forces did not obstruct India's construction activities); India's protest led to a 16-day face-off that continued even as Xi was in India.⁶⁷ That these two incidents coincided with the state visits of the Chinese Premier and President to India, respectively, indicated that they had been sanctioned and timed to convey the seriousness with which China took the border issue. ORF's Manoj Joshi has suggested that both the Depsang and Chumar face-offs could well be a reflection of China's anxiety following India's fresh projects near the LAC.⁶⁸

Besides these high-intensity incidents, minor transgressions also increased. Based on data provided by the Indian government in Parliament, while there were a total of 1,612 Chinese transgressions between 2010 and August 2014, the number rose to 1,625 in the next three years, 2016-19.^{69,n} Incidents of transgression reported in Indian media also increased after 2008.⁷⁰ In its annual report of 2015-16, for the first time in 13 years, the Ministry of Defence finally acknowledged "the increase in assertiveness during routine patrolling by the PLA along the LAC" and the security challenges emanating from it. That the annual reports since 2002-03 did not mention 'transgressions' along the LAC until the year 2015, indicates that such incidents picked up only later.

With Chinese assertiveness along the LAC rising, the pace of India-US strategic alignment and upgrade of India's border infrastructure also accelerated in the second half of the 2010s. In 2016, India signed the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) with the US to allow access to each other's logistics facilities.⁷¹ The same year, the US designated India as a 'major defence partner'.⁷² The 72-day-long Doklam standoff between the Indian Army and the PLA in June-August 2017 was a further catalyst.^o In the same year, India and the US resurrected the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)^p along with Japan and Australia, a grouping that China has accused of being targeted against it. In 2018, the two countries signed the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA),

n Government data for 2008, 2009 and 2015 was not available.

o China began extending a road at Doklam, an area disputed between China and Bhutan. As an ally of Bhutan's, India sent troops across the border to stop the construction.

p The Quad was launched in 2007, but had been near-dormant for many years.

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and in 2020, the Basic Exchanges and Cooperation Agreement (BECA), the last two of the four foundational defence agreements the US signs with allied countries.^q In 2018, the US also elevated India's status to Strategic Trade Authorisation Tier-1, allowing India licence-free access to dual-use military technology.⁷³ These agreements have accelerated India's integration into the US defence and security architecture.

The Chinese transgressions along the LAC remained high during this period, eventually culminating in the 2020 Ladakh crisis. This began with the PLA's border violation at multiple sites in Ladakh – Galwan (PP 14),^r Pangong Tso (North and South bank), Gogra (PP 15) and Hot Spring (PP 17A). At all these places, PLA soldiers intruded into Indian territory and erected temporary infrastructure, impeding Indian patrolling units. When early attempts at resolution failed, leading to clashes in Galwan on 15 June 2020 in which 20 Indian soldiers were killed,⁷⁴ both sides mobilised and deployed troops in large numbers in the region. Corps commanders of the two countries held 16 rounds of talks from May 2020 to September 2022 just to reach disengagement at these five friction points,⁷⁵ but de-escalation has eluded them and status-quo-ante appears a distant objective. China has also refused to discuss earlier intrusions into Depsang and Demchok as part of the ongoing negotiations.⁷⁶ Even as this crisis continues, the PLA has made two more attempts to challenge Indian soldiers at Yangtze in Arunachal Pradesh in October 2021 and December 2022.⁷⁷

The view of Chinese scholars, as reflected in commentaries published in *Global Times*, an arm of the CPC's flagship newspaper *People's Daily*, is that the US's Indo-Pacific strategy and its relationship with India is a containment strategy directed against China.⁷⁸ They maintain that India, in its pursuit of global ambitions, is using US-China rivalry as a strategic opportunity.⁷⁹ They explain the Ladakh crisis, including the Galwan incident, as India's attempt to exploit the situation. Such accusation offers insights into China's perception that border tensions with India are rooted in its (China's) geostrategic rivalry with the US. As Vijay Gokhale has argued,⁸⁰ since

q The other two were the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) signed in 2002 and Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) signed in 2016.

r The Indian Army has 65 patrolling points (PPs) along the LAC.

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China still suspects India is lacking strategic independence and vulnerable to becoming a pawn in US designs,⁸¹ it sees the LAC as another theatre of US-China competition.

Thus, friction at the India-China border since 2010 has increased with China's threat perception of a two-front challenge, suggesting a correlation between the two. Just as in the 1950-60s, China appears to be using the border issue to confront India with a two-front challenge as well as a means of managing its own problems.

India's relative weakness and limited preparedness to meet such a two-front challenge became apparent during the 2020 Ladakh standoff when it had to redirect the strike forces from the western front to the north.⁸² If India is ill-equipped, however, how is China's two-front threat perception credible? While India currently lacks the required capability, the increasing US-India strategic alignment and scaling up of border infrastructure along the LAC are geared towards overcoming the disadvantage. This legitimises China's concerns, creates a compelling case for it to use coercive tactics to exploit Indian vulnerability while it still exists. It also offers China the opportunity to outsource its two-front threat to India.

Even so, China has so far been reluctant to resort to the extreme steps as it did in the late 1950s and 1960s.^s Instead, they have used 'limited and controlled confrontation' and the protracted stalemate that has followed, as a strategy to ensure that the matter is treated seriously by India. Each of the face-offs of the 2010s—i.e., Depsang (2013), Chumar (2014), or Doklam (2017) —^t while being 'limited and contained' (essentially non-violent) in scope, turned into a 'prolonged and protracted' event, requiring extended negotiations and taking days to resolve. As a result, these incidents captured maximum attention and provoked discussions. From India's perspective, each resolution was hard-fought, achieved after long drawn-out diplomatic, political, and military effort. The peace settlement reached in each case cannot be jeopardised easily and are thus valuable. At the same time, it has

^s Galwan was an anomaly where confrontations turned violent leading to the loss of lives on both sides. One, the Chinese did not undertake a similar course of action at other friction points. Had this been a sanctioned policy, it would have been uniformly adopted. Two, the Chinese swiftly moved to immediately resolve the crisis by holding talks and Galwan became the first friction point to witness disengagement while others remained under negotiation. Three, the whole incident in Galwan unfolded for two days consisting of back-and-forth measures, indicating that it was unplanned and reactionary in nature.

^t Even though Doklam had differing strategic motives, the Chinese approach reflected the intention of prolonging the conflict by refusing to settle.

The Resurgence of China's Insecurity

raised the threshold of India's tolerance in sustaining a stable relationship with China. The 'peace by exasperation' has emerged as a critical Chinese strategy vis-à-vis India.

Have Chinese efforts proved effective? India's hesitant approach to upgrading infrastructure and deploying more troops along the border till the late-2000s, suggests that they had been successful. Past success would also explain China's persistence with this strategy in recent times. Yet in the last decade or so, it appears that China is dissatisfied with India's response. The Ladakh crisis in 2020 suggests that China views its pre-2020 efforts as having failed, forcing it to revise. China is now threatening to raise tensions to a new threshold that would escalate costs for India. Initiating multiple friction points by denying patrolling rights to Indian troops, making brigade-size deployments, refusing to de-escalate, and insisting on creating buffer zones, form part of this attempt. The Ladakh 2020 crisis is thus an attempt by China to restore an equilibrium that India seems to have disturbed.

If China, since 2010, has failed to draw the Indian response it expected, why does it persist with the border issue? First, it continues to believe that heightening tensions along the border can coerce India. Second, it recognises that the border is a perennially sensitive issue that can be used to influence India's preferences, especially since India is resource-starved.

A correlation can be made between the increasing volatility along the India-China border and China's rising threat perception of a two-front challenge. It is an old pattern that is being repeated. China has sought to use instability along the India-China border to outsource its two-front challenge to India. Apart from threat perception, China's assessment of its capability and India's corresponding incapacity to respond to a two-front challenge are further incentives. It seems to believe that if enough pressure is applied, the burden of maintaining peace along the border can be placed on India's shoulders, absolving it of responsibility.

Unlike in the 1950-60s, it is clear that the Chinese strategy since 2008 has not yielded desired results. It has instead strengthened India's resolve to seek external and internal balancing against China. In this context, the Ladakh crisis of 2020 appears to be part of a Chinese plan to regain its advantage by threatening to raise the costs of protecting the border for India and thereby restore the lost equilibrium. Given that none of the three developments discussed in this paper—deepening India-US defence relations, India's border infrastructure upgrade, and the asymmetry between India and China—will change in the near future, India must remain prepared for increased border tensions.

This paper recommends that India convey to China that the two-front problem is as much a challenge to China as it is to India. The burden of maintaining peace along the LAC should rest equally on both India and China; a disproportionate burden should not rest on India's shoulders. Repeating Ambassador Pan Tsuli's demarche will not hurt, and India should remind China that the latter is vulnerable too. Also, coercive measures seem to work with China as seen during the crises in Galwan, Pangong Tso, and Yangtze.⁸³ In each of these incidents, when India responded militarily, the PLA urgently sought disengagement, in contrast to its approach at the other friction points. Thus, China's violation of the LAC is also an opportunity for India to dictate a 'new normal'. Indian troops are no longer bound by previous rules of engagement (ROEs) along the border—India has revised them in the aftermath of Galwan and conveyed the same to China.⁸⁴ The new rules leave room for Indian troops to exercise limited military options.

Conclusion

China has shown an aversion to escalation whenever Indian troops have militarily retaliated. Reminding China of its vulnerability would also allow India to leverage the former's two-front situation to redress its similar concern.

However, retaliating effectively will also require stationing substantially more troops along the LAC to avoid being surprised and overwhelmed by Chinese transgressions. While it would push up the cost of maintaining the LAC, India has little option otherwise, given China itself has been adamant on maintaining large formations along the border. [ORF](#)

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