

Strategic Analysis Paper

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China in South Asia: The Case of India

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Key Points

- China's perception of India and vice-versa are a good indication of the relationship between the two countries.
- Whereas China previously dismissed India as an economic and military competitor, it is today beginning to look more closely at India through those lenses.
- India, on the other hand, continues to perceive China as a threat but, importantly, now perceives itself as being able to stand up to China.
- Those perceptions will have a major impact upon the relationship and the region.

Summary

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the re-emergence of China and India as major actors on the world stage. The two countries share many commonalities, both being populous Asian powers with contiguous territory, both ancient, previously-economically powerful civilisations. India, however, was colonised and Chinese territory was ceded to, and governed by, foreign powers. Importantly, both states were reduced to penury by the outsiders, leaving them with ambivalent perceptions of the West. Those commonalities led India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to publicly aspire to a joint leadership with China to initiate an Asian revival. India and China, he felt, could be leaders in Asia without either impinging upon the other; China and India could accommodate each other's growth and aspirations.

China and India had different reasons for their re-emergence in the latter half of the last century. The United States sought closer relations with China in 1972 in order to create a new front in its cold war against the Soviet Union. Consequent market forces enabled the Chinese economy to become the second-largest in the world. India, on the other hand, found itself in trouble in 1991 when its foreign currency reserves dwindled to three weeks' worth of imports. Fiscal reform and commercial re-engagement with the world enabled rapid economic growth, making its economy the third-largest in Asia today.

Competing economies are not the sole or main reason for the less-than-cordial relations between the two states. India continues to view China through the prism of the 1962 Sino-Indian War. In late October 1962, Chinese troops invaded India's north-east, routing the Indian Army. Though it lasted only a month, the war etched itself into India's psyche, colouring all future relations with China. Hence, when China acquired nuclear weapons, India embarked upon a nuclear programme; when China began to modernise its military, India upgraded its own. China, for its part, sees India as a potential economic and military rival in Asia. While they claim to have cordial relations, they often portray each other as an adversary. That stance extends into the political and commercial spheres; they compete internationally for energy resources and try to balance each other by developing political, economic and military relations regionally. They have effectively moved from accommodation to competition.

Analysis

While perception has a strong influence on state-to-state relations in general, it is especially the case in the Sino-Indian situation. It is no secret that Mao Zedong looked down upon the India administered by Nehru, who he considered to be a product of colonialism. It is indicative of their respective thinking that, while Nehru sought to understand China's strengths, Mao attempted to discern India's weaknesses. Nehru, according to one [analyst](#), held the deep and often-stated belief that China was 'India's natural friend and ally in the construction of the post-colonial world and the emergence of Asia as a strong influence in the international order' up to the time of his death in 1964. That was despite the fact that India had lost the Sino-Indian War of 1962 (although it could also be argued that Nehru held that view because he knew, even if he did not publicly acknowledge it, that the war was to a large degree a consequence of his "forward policy").

It is evident, on the other hand, that China could not have prosecuted the war without substantial planning. Gopal [notes](#) that Chinese troops, already experienced in battle through fighting the rebel Nationalist forces, in guerrilla warfare and from their invasion of Tibet, were pre-positioned in Tibet to acclimatise them to Himalayan altitudes, material and equipment accumulated to support the troops, and roads built in order to convey them to positions near the Indian border. Maxwell [records](#) that, in the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), by which name the present Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh was then known, 'a Chinese road led to a point three hours march behind the Thag La ridge [which] could carry seven-ton vehicles.' He adds that military intelligence indicated the presence of two Chinese regiments, equivalent to full Indian brigades, equipped with divisional artillery

approximately twenty miles on the Chinese side of the disputed border and connected to Thag La by yet another road. In short, as one editorial remarked, 'Neither the massive striking force nor the perfection of military planning ... displayed by the Chinese could have hastily improvised' (*Monthly Review*, January 1963, cited in Gopal, 1984, p. 232).

In India's perception, in short, while it offered China the opportunity to work together to restore Asia to its former glory, China was developing plans to stab it in the back. In China's perception, however, India used subterfuge in the form of Nehru's "forward policy" to gain territorial advantage in addition to using the illegal status quo to retain its claim to Chinese territory. Perception, as is evident, was coming to the fore in the relationship.

There were two major outcomes of the war. First, as previously stated, virtually all of India's perceptions of China now took place through the lens of the war. The war so etched itself into India's political psyche that it would, in time, lend towards moving India closer to the Soviet Union and entering into a security agreement with that country. China, for its part, now perceived Pakistan as a natural ally, one that shared its misgivings about India and had, itself, fought a war with it. Working on the principle that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, China and Pakistan developed a close relationship. These outcomes would later play into the greater Cold War that was being waged between the US and the Soviet Union. The 1962 war also established China's perception of India as a weaker state for the next few decades while India now recognised the fact that it needed to cater to its security on its western border as well as its northern and north-eastern borders.

For the rest of the Cold War period, until 1991, the animosity between the two countries remained muted, save for the occasional skirmish on the still-unresolved border. Indian leaders such as Rajiv Gandhi attempted to settle the matter but, for one reason or another, could not. China, in the meanwhile, concentrated on developing its economy. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, India lost its security partner and Russia soon devolved into its own economic morass, leaving it little time to spend on ensuring India's security. That situation, coupled with India's own financial worries, saw New Delhi cast off its policy of self-sufficiency, which was a failure overall, and re-engage with the rest of the world. Over time, while China grew to become the second-largest economy in the world, India likewise grew to become the third-largest in Asia. Both countries have invested in their militaries and are in the process of modernising them.

The new situation saw a change in India's perception of itself. Increased economic heft gave India a new sense of self-confidence and that, in turn, saw it enhance its standing internationally. China, recognising India's growing economy, sought to develop its trade with it. Sino-Indian trade soon reached around US\$50 billion, albeit that that figure is heavily skewed in Beijing's favour. Despite those trading ties, there remained an underlying rancour on both sides predicated on the un-demarcated border.

Matters came to a head in May 2013 when Chinese troops took up [positions](#) in Indian territory nineteen kilometres from the border that India recognised. Their presence, left unchallenged, could have jeopardised around 750 square kilometres of territory that India also claimed. After repeated requests that the troops be withdrawn were rebuffed, the Indian Chief of Army Staff briefed the Cabinet on India's options, short of conflict. The

Chinese troops withdrew in the event but that only served to reinforce China's belief that it could dominate India if the need arose.

It maintained a close watch on India's growing economy, nevertheless. To maintain its own economic growth, Beijing needed to import energy products from the Middle East and Africa. The ships that transported those products had to sail in relatively close proximity to India, well within the Indian Navy's strike range. The situation led some Chinese analysts to view India as a potential threat. They alleged that India is the dominant power in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and, given its great-power aspirations and potential, could become China's equal, countering its attempts to exert control in the IOR. Added to that, Beijing perceives India's maritime ambitions in geopolitical terms. One Chinese analyst has colourfully observed that 'The Indian subcontinent is akin to a massive triangle reaching into the heart of the Indian Ocean, benefitting any from there who seek to control the Indian Ocean'. Another erroneously alleged that Mahan declared, 'Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate India and the coastal states of the Indian Ocean, as well as control the massive area between the Mediterranean and the Pacific Ocean.' Quoting Nehru and the Indian strategist, K. M. Panikkar, Zhao Bole, Professor of South Asian Studies at Sichuan University, argued that India's rise was due to four main geopolitical factors. First, India and its surrounding areas possess many natural resources. Second, India is the most powerful state in the Indian Ocean Region. Third, the physical distance between New Delhi and Washington gives India space to manoeuvre despite the primacy of the US Navy in the Indian Ocean; and fourth, India borders economically dynamic regions such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and China itself. He claimed that India's non-aligned stance during the Cold War camouflaged its concern with maritime issues.

It would appear that, contrary to its public nonchalance in regard to India's economic growth, China was growing worried about New Delhi's increased stature. That worry would have only increased with the election of the fervently-nationalistic Narendra Modi to the office of Prime Minister of India. Modi brought with him a heightened nationalism that soon permeated the country and figured prominently in enhanced ties with the US which, like China, perceived trade opportunities with India but, unlike China, also saw the opportunity to sell military equipment and systems to it. Modi sought to enhance India's ties to the US and increasingly purchased US military equipment and entered into military agreements with Washington. The growing relationship has produced two major outcomes: it has increased India's self-confidence and enhanced its self-perception and, second, has increased China's concerns about India and its agenda in the region.

That self-confidence was made very visible during the Doklam stand-off between Chinese and Indian troops. In June 2017, Bhutanese troops saw Chinese soldiers and construction crew building a road in an area disputed by Bhutan and China. The Chinese rebuffed the requests of the Bhutanese to cease their construction, so Bhutan informed its security partner, India, of the development. New Delhi authorised its troops to cross into the disputed area, one to which India had no claim, to force the Chinese to cease their construction. China almost immediately put its "Three Warfares" concept into operation. That concept consists of enacting psychological, political and legal pressure on an adversary.

To China's concern, India not only withstood that pressure but even refuted China's statements about the affair. In the end, as a previous two-part FDI *Strategic Analysis Paper* showed ([here](#) and [here](#)), China attempted to save face by reaching a negotiated settlement with India, some months after it began, with both sides withdrawing their troops from the area.

China's perceptions of India as a regional competitor have grown since that incident. Whereas previously China dismissed India as an economic or military threat, (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#), for instance), its tone has now changed. One analyst, Yin Guoming, believes that India is now the second-largest threat to China, [saying](#):

[The] China-India standoff has compelled us to regard India as a serious rival. During the Dong Lang [Doklam] confrontation, it became very clear to everyone – from ordinary Chinese to foreign policy experts – that China must reckon India to be its second-biggest rival. And that China needs to re-assess, re-examine, and reformulate its India strategy. [Translated from the original Chinese.]

Another [remarked](#) that:

The biggest mistake we have made in the past two decades has been to underestimate India and ignore India. During these years of India's rapid progress, we did not trouble India, did not make India stumble or make India shed tears. [Translated from the original Chinese.]

In addition to its growing ties with the US, India has recently entered into an agreement with France, giving it [access](#) to French military bases in the Indian Ocean and the Horn of Africa, and has struck an agreement with [Oman](#) to access the port of Duqm for military use and logistical support, effectively allowing it to shadow China in the whole of the western Indian Ocean. Another [agreement](#) with France enables information sharing between both countries on maritime traffic and maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean amid China's expanding naval forays in the area where India wants to establish itself as a security provider. Such developments can only add to China's increasingly uneasy perceptions of India.

There has been a marked change in the way that China perceives India. New Delhi is now a major regional competitor in Beijing's estimation, one which can no longer be dismissed out of hand. Importantly for India, its major change of perception has been in the way it views itself vis-à-vis China. India now sees itself as being able to stand up to China and is unwilling to be cowed into submission to Beijing. These changed perceptions are bound to have a major impact upon their relationship.

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