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Armed Confrontation Between China and India

Daniel S. Markey
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Author Bio

Daniel S. Markey is an adjunct senior fellow for India, Pakistan, and South Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations and academic director and senior research professor in the Global Policy Program at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies.

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Armed Confrontation Between China and India

INTRODUCTION

The China-India relationship is remarkably stable in many ways. Bilateral summits and new multilateral groupings often bring the two Asian giants together in common cause. Both sides clearly appreciate the value of peace as a way to expand their trade and investment ties and to enable a continued focus on economic development at home. Yet important differences and suspicions persist; some date back to 1962, when India lost a short but decisive war to China. Others relate to the rising global ambitions, military capabilities, and political and economic influence of these two Asian neighbors.

Although Beijing and New Delhi have repeatedly demonstrated a mutual desire to prevent conflict and mitigate tensions when they arise and have avoided a serious violent clash since 1967, the potential for their relationship to deteriorate is ever present. No single issue or crisis is likely to produce this result. However, a series of disputes in quick succession or their simultaneous emergence could lead to an armed confrontation worse than any since the 1960s. A border clash could inflict dozens of casualties, jolt global markets, hurt regional economic growth, and undermine cooperative China-India efforts on regional and global issues of concern to the United States, including counterterrorism and counterpiracy, even if both sides managed to avoid a more serious military escalation.

The United States has a major interest in preventing armed confrontation between China and India. If preventive efforts fail, however, U.S. policymakers should work to limit the immediate costs of a confrontation and to avoid unnecessary new points of friction with Beijing. But in doing so they should seek to resolve the crisis on terms that favor a closer U.S.-India partnership.

THE CONTINGENCIES

Under normal circumstances, India and China are likely to have sufficient desire and capacity to prevent any single point of friction from sparking a military crisis. Yet if more than one dispute were to unfold at the same time, the risk of escalation would grow as positions taken in one conflict could complicate the management of another. Leaders would have stronger political and strategic incentives to avoid backing down, fearing the costs of domestic opinion and sacrificed leverage on the other dispute. Of the conceivable differences that could arise between China and India, the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is the most likely theater for an armed confrontation. Three other conceivable disputes have the greatest potential to aggravate tensions and spark a crisis that could result in military escalation.

Skirmish along the LAC. Every year, China and India claim hundreds of incursions by the other across the line that separates them in the Himalayan region, near the politically sensitive areas of Kashmir and Tibet. Many of the flare-ups can be traced to the practical challenge of managing a contested border in

difficult, mountainous terrain; over time, forces on both sides have developed signals to warn the other and avoid deadly clashes.

Yet the frequency and aggressiveness of probing patrols appear to be on the rise, and LAC incidents have repeatedly drawn the attention of Chinese and Indian leaders over the past several years. In April 2013, a Chinese platoon set up an encampment in the Depsang Valley—territory claimed by India—leading to a three-week standoff. A negotiated settlement finally led both sides to withdraw their forces. In October 2013, the two sides signed a Border Defense Cooperation Agreement intended to reduce the likelihood of a future border skirmish. That agreement failed to prevent another flare-up just before Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to New Delhi in September 2014, when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi ordered one thousand troops to the contested area of Chumar along the LAC to match a Chinese contingent. In his meetings with Xi, Modi demanded that Chinese forces withdraw, and subsequent military-to-military negotiations ended the standoff soon after.

This pattern of border incursion, response, negotiation, and withdrawal is one that both sides will continue to exhibit. Both China and India have expanded and modernized their military forces devoted to the border region. In 2013, the Indian government authorized a new mountain strike corps of forty thousand troops to address the perceived threat of China's border presence. Along a more heavily militarized border, miscalculations and accidents will have greater potential to escalate from nonviolent tussles to tit-for-tat incidents of harassment and even exchanges of fire.

A brief skirmish, perhaps resulting from surprise or accident in the heat of multiple disputes, would not necessarily inflict more than dozens of casualties and would permit forces to stand down without escalating to a wider war. That said, both sides would also fear the domestic political backlash of appearing weak. Under routine circumstances, China and India would seek diplomatic and economic means of retaliation. For example, Beijing would curtail its plans for investment in India, and New Delhi would back away from new multilateral institutions spearheaded by China, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. However, if a border clash were to occur during a period of heightened tension, the likelihood of a military crisis would grow, and the potential for it to escalate beyond an initial skirmish could not be ruled out.

Crisis between India and Pakistan. An India-Pakistan crisis is most likely to take place as the consequence of a major terrorist attack in India perpetrated by a group based in Pakistan, as happened in Mumbai in 2008. Given that Pakistan has failed to dismantle the terrorist groups most likely to attack India, such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and its affiliates, and that Indian defenses against terrorism can never be foolproof, another major strike is a realistic possibility. India's hawkish Prime Minister Modi—facing domestic pressures to retaliate, aiming to avoid the strategic consequences of showing weakness to Pakistan, and having developed punitive military-strike options short of full-scale ground mobilization—is more likely to respond with force than his predecessor was in 2008.

Despite China's long and deep friendship with Pakistan, an India-Pakistan crisis need not necessarily pull Beijing into the fray. For over a decade, China has worked behind the scenes with the United States to manage crises between India and Pakistan, mainly by urging caution and restraint in conversations with top Pakistani leaders. That remains Beijing's preference.

But Chinese leaders would be less inclined and able to deliver similar messages if they were simultaneously caught in a standoff with India along the LAC. Moreover, even under normal circumstances China's desire to demonstrate its regional military superiority and maintain Pakistan as an ally suggests that China would take military action to help Pakistan escape any significant defeat at India's hands.

For India, a two-front crisis would place extreme stress on military and civilian leaders, heightening their perception of threat and making further escalation more likely. Whether through miscommunication, accident, or miscalculation, an India-Pakistan crisis could escalate into armed confrontation between China and India, and the contingency becomes all the more likely if Beijing and New Delhi are already embroiled in other disputes.

Spillover from Tibetan protests. A major bout of political turbulence inside Tibet is another contingency with serious potential to raise China-India border tensions and transform a manageable dispute into a military crisis. India has been implicated in the China-Tibet dispute since the Tibetan uprising of 1959 because it plays host to the Dalai Lama and more than one hundred thousand Tibetan refugees. China remains extraordinarily sensitive to the history of externally sponsored Tibetan unrest (including by the United States in the 1950s and 1960s). Chinese leaders have placed Tibet on a short list of “core national interests” that they would protect with military force. China’s control over Tibet is not in doubt, but the terms of that control are contested. Beijing views the current Dalai Lama as a political threat, refuses to enter serious negotiations with the government-in-exile, and has used various methods to manage the Tibetan lama hierarchy as a way of consolidating its political power.

The protest movement inside Tibet has taken on a new dimension in recent years; since 2009, more than 140 Tibetans have self-immolated. The Dalai Lama, who turned eighty in July 2015, has further stoked Chinese concerns by publicly hinting that he could name his successor before he dies and that his next incarnation might live outside Tibet and beyond Beijing’s control, where he could lead a new generation of protests for Tibetan political autonomy. One location often mentioned as a potential birthplace for the next Dalai Lama is Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, home to an important Buddhist monastery. That territory is held by India but claimed by China as “Southern Tibet,” making it a top potential flash-point for protests and the spillover of a China-India crisis from the Tibetan dispute.

China has never been shy about pressing India to muzzle Tibetan protestors and has often gotten its way. In 2008, the Indian government yielded to Chinese demands to establish a security cordon around the Olympic torch procession, effectively shutting down the center of New Delhi for the event. But India’s current government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, is likely to take a tougher line and has already irritated Beijing on related issues. In May 2014, Modi invited Lobsang Sangay, the political head of the Tibetan government-in-exile, to his inauguration; a month later, Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj demanded that China follow a “one India” policy in reference to Arunachal Pradesh; in February 2015, Modi traveled to Arunachal Pradesh and unveiled plans for a \$6 billion road project; and in May 2015, while in Beijing, he pointedly requested that China “reconsider” its stance on Arunachal Pradesh. In short, the next time Beijing tells New Delhi to gag Tibetan protests, it cannot be sure of India’s meek acquiescence.

Heightened maritime competition. Maritime competition between China and India is still nascent and should not be overblown; China’s activities in the Indian Ocean are far less extensive or provocative than its moves closer to home, and India’s reach into the South China Sea remains limited. But both sides hold important and growing interests in the waters of the Indo-Pacific as transit routes, spheres of political influence, and points of military vulnerability. Accordingly, each is rapidly building its capacity to project naval power by expanding and modernizing its fleet while developing naval ties with neighboring states in ways that touch sensitive nerves for the other.

India’s diplomatic position on the South China Sea—supporting the principle of freedom of navigation and the peaceful resolution of disputed territory—is nearly identical to that of the United States.

China is irritated by that stance, along with India's investments in oil exploration off the Vietnamese coast and closer naval ties with the United States, Japan, and Vietnam. Similarly, Indian strategic planners worry about China's close naval ties to Pakistan, including sales of surface ships and submarines as well as major investments in the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar; arms sales to Bangladesh and potential Chinese naval access to Chittagong port; and the development of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. China's semipermanent naval presence in the Gulf of Aden, ostensibly to support counterpiracy missions, also demonstrates an expanding naval reach that rankles India.

A scenario of tit-for-tat politico-military escalation in the Indo-Pacific is now possible. In 2012, official Indian statements on "maritime freedoms" prompted China to send a naval frigate to provide an unexpected twelve-hour "escort" to Indian warships through contested waters of the South China Sea. If a similar step is taken in the future, India could choose to up the ante, for instance, by announcing plans to sell Brahmos antiship cruise missiles to Vietnam. China, in turn, could direct its ire at the activities of India's leading international oil company, ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL), which maintains a stake in exploration block 128 off Vietnam's coast in waters China considers its own. There, China could replay the May 2014 standoff sparked by its deployment of a deep-sea oil rig or simply harass oil-survey ships. At that point, India could send warships to defend OVL interests, as then Indian Navy Chief Admiral D.K. Joshi observed would be necessary in a December 2012 interview. China's response could bring the two sides to the verge of a tense standoff not unlike the 2012 Scarborough Reef incident between China and the Philippines. With each escalation of the maritime conflict, the potential for violence through mishap, miscommunication, or intention would increase.

WARNING INDICATORS

Multiple China-India disputes sparked at nearly the same time is a realistic, if unlikely, scenario during the next twelve to eighteen months. An assessment of the overall strategic context shows that China-India border spats are increasingly common, Tibetan protests are worsening while Beijing's stance on Tibet hardens, China has made other aggressive moves in the South China Sea, and Pakistan has done too little to restrain anti-Indian terrorist groups.

Specific warning indicators of worsening land-border tensions would include upticks in the frequency and depth of probing patrols by either side; unilateral revision of the "rules of the road" for tactical military operations (for instance, if one side begins firing warning shots when past practice has been to display flag signals); new military construction projects or deployments along the border, whether of troops or hardware (such as missile sites, landing strips, or vehicles); and official use of new diplomatic formulations or visa policies that aggressively press broader territorial claims.

Warning indicators of China's involvement in an India-Pakistan conflict already underway would include new joint China-Pakistan military exercises or Chinese arms sales. A Chinese revision of its official diplomatic stance on Kashmir—shifting back to full support for Pakistan's favored position—or action to support that position at the United Nations would also represent a warning sign.

Warning indicators of an impending Tibet contingency include increased protest activity by Tibetan opposition groups, such as another surge in self-immolations or demonstrations; new announcements by the Dalai Lama about his plans for reincarnation or evidence of his rapidly deteriorating health; and unanticipated shifts in policy or official rhetoric on Tibet by Beijing or New Delhi.

Warning indicators for a maritime contingency between China and India would include aggressive new Chinese harassment of other oil-exploration operations off the Vietnamese coast, a significant

expansion of Chinese patrols as part of its counterpiracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, and provocative Chinese rhetoric directed against Indian oil exploration in the South China Sea. New Indian oil-exploration investments in partnership with Vietnam, sales of particularly potent military equipment (especially the Brahmos missile), and senior-level statements about “maritime freedom” or China’s appropriate role in traditional Indian waters could also signal a brewing crisis.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTERESTS

The United States has a major interest in peaceful and cooperative relations between China and India. They are the world’s two largest countries by population and important U.S. trading and diplomatic partners. A series of disputes resulting in an armed confrontation between China and India would roil international markets, exacerbate fears in other Asian capitals about Chinese assertiveness, and distract Beijing and New Delhi from constructive agendas of economic development in their own countries and in Asia. The resulting setbacks to the Chinese and Indian economies could potentially harm U.S. investors, retailers, manufacturers, and service providers.

An armed confrontation between China and India would put the United States in a no-win position. Beijing would likely perceive any U.S. support to India as part of an unwelcome U.S. strategy to contain China. That would contribute to a sharpening of global competition between China and the United States in ways Washington would prefer to avoid, or at least to postpone.

But if Washington were to remain neutral or favor China’s position, India would perceive U.S. policies as abandonment. That would jeopardize prospects for U.S.-India strategic partnership pursued by the Barack Obama and George W. Bush administrations through diplomatic initiatives like the civil nuclear deal and motivated by a long-term goal of sustaining the liberal international order favored by the United States. Partnership aside, a humiliating India retreat from a crisis with China (for example, pulling back from Indian claims along the LAC) would undercut U.S. efforts to support India’s rise as a regional and international power and a counterweight to China. A U.S. failure to back India in the face of Chinese military intimidation would also weaken the U.S. government’s ability to reassure its East Asian allies elsewhere, including those along the South China Sea.

In sum, Washington has no interest in backing offensive moves by New Delhi that unduly antagonize Beijing. In the event of an armed confrontation, however, the United States has a significant interest in resolving the crisis on terms that would promote a closer U.S. partnership with India.

PREVENTIVE OPTIONS

The United States cannot unilaterally resolve disputes between China and India, but it does have a variety of options for facilitating efforts by Beijing and New Delhi to reduce tensions and for helping to prevent the specific contingencies that could, when compounded, bring about an armed confrontation between China and India.

Options for reducing the general risk of disputes between China and India. With respect to the broader China-India relationship, Washington could use its ongoing bilateral strategic dialogues with Beijing and New Delhi to discuss compromise options and new confidence-building measures, such as encouraging, facilitating, and even arbitrating a China-India dialogue on territorial disputes. Such conversations have been rare, largely because all sides appreciate that a breakthrough on any one of the

major disagreements between China and India is unlikely. As an outside party, the United States will have limited leverage and will run the risk of being perceived as siding with one country or the other.

Similar goals could be pursued in a multilateral forum, but there is a striking dearth of formal institutions designed specifically for senior-level diplomacy among Washington, Beijing, and New Delhi. The United States could work to establish a new formal trilateral dialogue, building on past efforts at the informal, or Track II, level. A related option would be to expand the dialogue to a quadrilateral format that includes Pakistan. That expansion could enable a wider regional discussion but would come at a cost, as India-Pakistan disputes tend to distract or even paralyze multilateral organizations.

Another category of general preventive options relates to U.S. efforts to enhance Indian defense capabilities as a way to help it deter aggressive Chinese (or Pakistani) moves and gain confidence sufficient to avoid rash actions of its own. The United States and India have expanded their joint exercises over the past decade, and additional training relevant to China-India contingencies could be added. Having achieved diplomatic breakthroughs with New Delhi (such as the civil nuclear deal), Washington is now in a position to consider selling to India its most sophisticated technologies, such as by outfitting India's next-generation aircraft carrier with high-quality aviation and propulsion systems. Regarding potential sales of this type, questions arise as to whether the United States would unintentionally encourage India to take on riskier missions—for instance, in the South China Sea—and worsen the toll of any military confrontation that does occur, or whether Beijing would respond aggressively to U.S. sales, perceiving them as provocative steps aimed at containing China.

Options for preventing specific China-India contingencies. U.S. options for helping to prevent specific China-India contingencies could build on some of these broader efforts. For instance, a new U.S.-China-India dialogue could provide a useful forum for the United States to offer technical assistance in clarifying the demarcation of the LAC—through satellite, air, or land-based systems—and thus to reduce the potential for inadvertent crossings and military contact. Similarly, along with major weapons systems designed to help Indian deterrence efforts, the United States could expand ongoing intelligence sharing and technical assistance for India's homeland defense, for example by providing or selling technologies for improved unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

The United States could take other unilateral preventive steps. To reduce the prospect of a major India-Pakistan contingency, the United States could place greater pressure on Pakistan to curb anti-Indian terrorist groups, such as by conditioning a greater portion (or all) of U.S. military assistance on a demonstrated shift in Pakistani policy to include a crackdown on LeT and its affiliates. If taken to extremes, however, that action could come at a counterproductive cost because it would jeopardize other aspects of counterterrorism cooperation with Islamabad. To reduce the likelihood of political turmoil in Tibet that could boil over into a China-India crisis, Washington has the option of trying to push Beijing and the Dalai Lama into negotiations by raising the issue at the United Nations or in other multilateral settings, offering additional aid or other incentives to the Tibetan opposition, and threatening to alter Washington's public stance on Tibet if Beijing refuses to enter talks. These steps are, however, likely to backfire, ruffling feathers in Beijing without leveling sufficient pressure to force a desirable policy shift. Alternatively, U.S. officials could encourage India to accommodate Chinese demands on Tibet to keep the peace, although this would undermine U.S. support for Tibetan rights. To reduce the coercive capacity of China's navy in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, the United States could expand its own naval presence by fully implementing its global re-balancing of forces (from west to east) or increasing naval budgets.

MITIGATING OPTIONS

If prevention efforts failed, the United States would lack the capacity to pull India and China out of a military crisis single-handedly, but U.S. policymakers would have options for mitigating the confrontation by facilitating communication, pursuing diplomatic initiatives to cool tensions, and deploying U.S. military forces to raise the costs of escalation.

Bilateral options. Working bilaterally in the heat of a brewing dispute, Washington could play a valuable middleman role for conveying messages between Beijing and New Delhi. Concerns over effective communication in a military crisis have led China and India to announce plans for hotlines between top political and military leaders. Even if these promises are fully implemented, one side could still be unresponsive in direct communication with the other but willing to deal through Washington.

In addition, the United States could develop and share satellite imagery (from along the China-India border, India-Pakistan border, or waters of the Indo-Pacific) to calm nerves, especially in New Delhi, and reduce the chances of preemptive military escalations or miscalculation. U.S. shuttle diplomacy, such as was undertaken between India and Pakistan from 2001 to 2002, could also be used in the region (either between Beijing and New Delhi or New Delhi and Islamabad) to stave off military escalation and provide U.S. guarantees for a phased drawdown.

The United States would also have the option of deploying its own military forces to defuse a confrontation, most likely by signaling support to India and raising the costs of escalation for China (or Pakistan). Sending a carrier group to the region would be one familiar signaling option, but other U.S. military moves, such as announcing arms sales (or imminent deliveries) to India or U.S.-India joint exercises, could prove effective, depending on the specific nature of the contingency. In an extreme, highly unlikely case, Washington could provide direct military support to Indian forces. That step would risk further escalation of the confrontation and deterioration in U.S.-China relations, but if successful it would likely solidify long-term U.S.-India ties.

Multilateral options. U.S. diplomats could use a new trilateral forum to direct early attention to incipient disputes and thereby reduce the likelihood that multiple contingencies take place at once. Having an established trilateral institution with physical headquarters and staffed secretariat would help to increase communication in times of high tension. If a new multilateral forum is not yet in place at the time of a new crisis, Washington could use existing international institutions such as the UN Security Council to rally international support, urge restraint, and negotiate troop or ship pullbacks as needed. U.S. diplomats could also use the promise of future talks in the United Nations or a special international conference as an incentive, for example, to calm Tibetan protestors in India, or to encourage ground or naval forces to pull back from forward positions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

An armed confrontation between China and India is a low-probability but high-cost contingency that the United States should aim to prevent. If a confrontation does take place, the United States should work to mitigate the crisis in ways that reassure India and clearly demonstrate the U.S. commitment to its partnership with India. Preventive policies should aim to build new channels for diplomacy and to

reduce the likelihood of an India-Pakistan standoff, while mitigating policies should prioritize strengthening the U.S. capacity to deter Chinese escalation and enhancing Indian military defenses. To advance these goals, U.S. policymakers should take the following specific steps:

- *Establish a new trilateral forum.* President Obama should invite his Chinese and Indian counterparts to a trilateral summit to set the terms for subsequent working-level trilateral meetings and, if successful, to establish a permanent forum for the world's three most populous states. Even in its early stages, the trilateral forum would improve cooperation in dangerous contingencies. A trilateral institution, especially one with a permanent secretariat, would offer the best technical means for secure communication, intelligence sharing, and sensitive diplomacy. To avoid duplicating other multilateral institutions, upsetting excluded U.S. allies, or raising Chinese and Indian fears of unwelcome coercive diplomacy, the United States should clarify its aim to build confidence and habits of cooperation, promote discussion, and improve coordination without binding deliberation or coercive negotiations, and should promise transparency on all issues that pertain to allied interests.
- *Condition a portion of U.S. military assistance to Pakistan.* Because another India-Pakistan standoff would increase the potential for an armed confrontation between China and India, the United States should better signal its grave concerns about Pakistan's inadequate efforts to clamp down on LeT, its affiliates, and successor organizations. The U.S. Congress can help by inserting waiver-free conditions in at least 25 percent of U.S. military aid, requiring evidence Pakistan is tackling anti-Indian terrorist groups, including through law enforcement and judicial proceedings. Because the United States has other important goals in Pakistan—such as supporting the fight against terrorist groups like the Pakistani Taliban—aid and reimbursements for those activities and for civilian development programs should remain exempt from these conditions.
- *Maintain and expand the U.S. military presence in the Indo-Pacific.* China's ability to make aggressive moves against lesser powers in the Indo-Pacific—potentially including India—is partly a function of its rapidly growing military strength, including its fleet and a supporting array of reconnaissance and strike capabilities. To keep pace with China in the Indo-Pacific, the United States should consider a combination of new strategies and larger naval budgets for weapon systems to maintain presence and reassure allies and partners like India. For example, because China has a vastly expanded arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles to imperil surface vessels off its shores, the United States should develop and expand its fleet of unmanned underwater vehicles.
- *Enhance India's defensive security capabilities.* U.S. policymakers should expand India's access to U.S. high-tech weapons systems in ways designed to discourage Indian military adventurism that would provoke a hostile Chinese reaction. U.S. arms sales should help India deter Chinese (and Pakistani) provocations, defend India's borders, and clarify the U.S. commitment to long-term strategic partnership. To this end, U.S. officials should consider sales of high-tech components in UAVs, aircraft carriers, and submarines. In the highly unlikely event that a China-India confrontation escalates, the United States should respond favorably to Indian requests for rapid arms shipments, and in a worst case, should even be prepared to move U.S. military forces to signal support to India and bolster its defenses.

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