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UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S PERCEPTIONS AND STRATEGY TOWARD NUCLEAR WEAPONS: A CASE STUDY APPROACH

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
Problem Statement.....	3
Research Objectives	3
Methodology	4
Structure of the Report.....	4
China’s Evolving Nuclear Weapons Strategy	5
Case Study Findings	5
Korean War of 1950–53.....	6
Taiwan Strait Crises of 1954–55 and 1958	7
Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.....	9
Sino-Soviet Border Conflict of 1969.....	10
Recent China-India Border Conflicts and the Role of Nuclear Weapons	12
Key Findings.....	12
Nuclear Deterrence Mattered Little in China’s Use of Force Calculus	12
Nuclear Coercion against China Was Ineffective after the Onset of Hostilities	12
Strategic Balance Calculus was Influential in the Outcome of Certain Conflicts	13
Fears of Nuclear “Blackmail” Remain a Powerful Narrative in Modern Chinese Thinking	13
Retaining a “Minimum Means of Reprisal” Matters to Deter Adversary Behavior.....	13
China’s Lack of Experience in Nuclear Escalation May Lead to Miscalculation	14
The Potential to Misread Nuclear Signals Remains Worrisome.....	14
Recommendations	14
Appendix: Recent China-India Border Conflicts and the Role of Nuclear Weapons.....	16
A Brief History of Sino-Indian Conflict.....	17
China’s Nuclear Deterrent and Impact on Sino-India Relations.....	21
India’s Nuclear Modernization and PRC Reactions	23
The Doklam Border Conflict of 2017	25
The Galwan Border Conflict of 2020–21	28
Implications for Sino-India Relations	30
Acknowledgements and Author Biographies.....	39

INTRODUCTION

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The nuclear arsenal of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is undergoing significant transformation, as reported by the 2022 U.S. DoD report on China's military power. In 2021, Beijing accelerated its nuclear expansion, with estimates placing its current stockpile at over 400 warheads, and it is projected to reach 1,500 warheads by 2035. In addition, Beijing is also reportedly consolidating its nuclear triad of bombers, submarines, and intercontinental ballistic missiles, as well as moving to a launch-on-warning posture.¹

These quantitative and qualitative improvements are advancing China toward nuclear parity with the United States, significantly impacting strategic calculations in Beijing and Washington, especially during times of heightened instability. Yet critical gaps remain in understanding how China views nuclear deterrence. Most importantly—and most urgently—there is limited insight into China's nuclear weapons calculations in potential confrontations with another nuclear power—in this case, the United States.

The English-language literature on China's use of force and crisis management does not focus on PRC nuclear weapons doctrine. The Chinese-language literature on nuclear crisis management is significantly underdeveloped. Much of the existing writings on the topic draw heavily from an outdated People's Liberation Army (PLA) Second Artillery Corps' campaign text that is nearly devoid of historical references and fails to capture the complexities of actual nuclear crises.²

At best, we understand that China's approach to nuclear weapons may be changing, and the U.S. policy research community has concluded that "China has perceived a need to adapt and update its posture to address changing requirements."³ Moreover, while we know that China has been enhancing the striking power and survivability of its theater and strategic missile forces and is rethinking its approach to missile force deterrence operations, we are far less knowledgeable about what this means for stability and escalation management in a crisis or conflict with the United States.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To address these critical gaps in understanding, this study examines Chinese writings and analyses regarding past crises between nuclear weapons states—including those in which China was involved—to understand what lessons Beijing took from them and how those lessons inform PRC thinking in future crises. Specifically, this report seeks to answer the following questions:

- *The nature of nuclear crises:* How do Chinese experts characterize the cause and nature of historical nuclear crises? For example, are the crises viewed as unfortunate and dangerous situations that can be avoided, as inevitable clashes that cannot be avoided, or as opportunities that can advance a country's strategic interests?
- *Managing nuclear crises and military escalation:* What do Chinese experts view as the major strategic decisions that foreign leaders (or Chinese leaders) made during Cold War nuclear crises, and to what extent did leaders have control over nuclear escalation? Do Chinese experts recognize the dangers of dramatic nuclear escalation versus incremental escalation? Do Chinese scholars focus on pressures for conventional preventive strikes on a country's nuclear arsenal?
- *Factors that influence nuclear crisis decision-making:* What do Chinese experts identify as the major strategic mistakes or correct decisions that foreign or Chinese leaders make? And what leads to such decision making?

- *Nuclear weapons use*: Do Chinese experts view nuclear weapons as mainly useful to deter adversaries from crisis involvement or military escalation, to inflict countervalue or counterforce damage, or for other purposes?
- *Chinese perspectives on U.S. behavior*: What do Chinese experts take from U.S. behavior patterns during historical nuclear crises or escalations? What factors do Chinese scholars focus on that were key to encouraging or discouraging the United States from using nuclear threats or nuclear weapons?
- *Chinese perspectives on U.S. allies and partners*: What are Beijing's views of U.S. extended deterrence assurances toward its key allies and partners during conflicts?

This study presents the implications of this research for DTRA and the United States, especially with regard to U.S.-China strategic stability, U.S.-China crisis management, and strategic and conventional deterrence vis-à-vis China. DTRA and SI-ST have put tremendous effort into characterizing the future battlespace and informing future DTRA and DoD operations, activities, and investments, particularly in SI-ST's priority to "illuminate adversary intentions and strategies, including possible intentions behind China's nuclear modernization efforts, how such intentions and China's growing capabilities influence Beijing's perspectives on deterrence, escalation and crisis/conflict, and the implications."⁴ Thus, this study will serve that goal and provide actionable recommendations to the United States, as well as U.S. allies and partners, as they grapple with how to respond in a crisis with a more potent nuclear competitor in China.

METHODOLOGY

The study selected a range of cases to understand Chinese nuclear thinking in relation to different crisis situations. The cases span the Cold War and post-Cold War periods and include crises involving China as well as major crises or conflicts that PRC analysts have examined in-depth but in which China was not a direct participant. The study focuses primarily on threats or potential threats of nuclear use between two nuclear-armed adversaries.

The six major case studies include the Korean War of 1950–53, the First and Second Taiwan Strait Crises of 1954–55 and 1958, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the Sino-Soviet border clashes of 1969, and the various border conflicts from 2020 to 2021 between China and India.⁵ These six crises between nuclear-armed adversaries were chosen for their importance, their potential lessons for future U.S.-China nuclear confrontation dynamics, and because they best capture Chinese views on the nuclear deterrent dynamics at play. Because some of these cases directly involve China or have been the subject of in-depth examination by PRC analysts, they also present accessible Chinese-language sources for review.⁶

This study is informed by the analysis of Chinese-language sources, including official Chinese documents such as white papers and speeches; monographs and journal articles, including those published by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); and state-affiliated think tanks and academic institutions, including military-related research institutions. This study also references official CCP histories and biographies of Chinese leaders and military strategists. It examines unofficial sources, including Chinese academic journal articles and Chinese translations and interpretations of English-language history and political science works on nuclear crisis management, deterrence, and use. It also includes newly available Chinese writings and documentaries on these historical crises.

The report is also informed by insights drawn from a private workshop composed of subject-matter experts held in Washington, D.C., in January 2024.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This report starts with a baseline assessment of the history of China's evolving nuclear deterrent strategy from 1964 to the present, emphasizing the sources and drivers of China's recent shift from a "lean and effective" (精干

有效) strategy to one focused on pursuing quantitative and qualitative parity with the United States.⁷ Second, it will present six case studies of PRC perceptions and analyses of past crises between nuclear-weapon states. Finally, it will conclude with key findings and recommendations for DTRA and the United States, especially with regard to U.S.-China strategic stability, U.S.-China crisis management, and strategic and conventional deterrence.

CHINA'S EVOLVING NUCLEAR WEAPONS STRATEGY

China's nuclear strategy, rooted in Mao Zedong's assertion of nuclear weapons as political tools rather than military assets, remained relatively consistent from the mid-20th century until the early 2000s.⁸ This perspective, emphasizing the psychological and political impact of nuclear capabilities, shaped China's approach to nuclear arms, leading to a lean and effective strategy focused on self-defense. Despite its conservative stance, China encountered instances of nuclear coercion during the Cold War, fostering a deep-seated aversion to external nuclear threats. However, Mao's baseline theory of nuclear utility limited strategic discourse on alternative conceptions of nuclear posture, constraining strategic thinking on nuclear arms until recent years.

China's commitment to a no-first-use (NFU) policy since its nuclear debut in 1964 has been a hallmark of its nuclear doctrine. This pledge, reiterated in the 2006 PRC defense white paper, asserts that China will only employ nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack by another country, refraining from nuclear use or threat against non-nuclear states or in nuclear-weapon-free zones.⁹ Despite this official policy, doubts persist within the academic community about its unconditional adherence, particularly in conflict scenarios.¹⁰ Changes in China's nuclear doctrine, including a reported shift toward a launch-on-warning posture, also challenge the credibility of its longstanding NFU policy.¹¹

Meanwhile, shifts in the global strategic landscape and perceived threats to its nuclear posture have prompted China, under President Xi Jinping, to embark on a significant modernization of its nuclear forces. Renaming the Second Artillery Corps as the PLA Rocket Force in 2015 marked a pivotal step in China's nuclear overhaul under Xi's leadership. Subsequent DoD reports suggest a notable increase in China's nuclear arsenal, with projections indicating further growth in the coming years.¹² These quantitative changes are occurring in tandem with major policy statements from China's leaders and military organs emphasizing the importance of China building up a "new type" of strategic deterrent. For example, Xi Jinping proclaimed that China would "establish a strong system of strategic deterrence" (打造强大战略威慑力量体系) at the CCP's 20th National Congress in October 2020.¹³ Furthermore, the PLA's most recent Science of Military Strategy in 2020 was notable for a passage calling for the PLA to "strive to build a lean and effective strategic nuclear force *commensurate with China's international status and commensurate with national security and development interests* [emphasis added]."¹⁴

Amidst these developments, debates arise within the nuclear community regarding the extent of China's strategic shift and the implications for global security. While several established nuclear scholars assess that China's numerical increase does not constitute a change to its fundamental posture, others have offered an alternative hypothesis that we may be witnessing a fundamental change to China's nuclear strategy.¹⁵ To develop a more comprehensive judgment, it is crucial to understand the historical context underlying China's evolving nuclear deterrence calculus and derive implications for strategic stability in the 21st century.

CASE STUDY FINDINGS

The following section analyzes six case studies relevant to understanding how China has viewed nuclear crises of the past. Each case study includes a short "scene-setter" summary of the conflict, followed by an analysis of the key factors most prominent in China's assessment of the nuclear dimensions of the conflict.

KOREAN WAR OF 1950–53

The Korean War stands out as a seminal event for China and East Asia in terms of nuclear weapons strategy and perceptions. The war began with the invasion of South Korea by North Korea in June of 1950, and the United States entered the war one month later. Following the United States' victory as a result of the Incheon landings on September 15, 1950, Seoul was reclaimed by South Korea, and the North Koreans—fearing further losses—contacted Beijing with a request for military aid. As U.S. General MacArthur approached the 38th parallel with the intention to cross into North Korean territory, China announced on October 3, 1950, that if MacArthur crossed, China's military would intervene on behalf of North Korea.¹⁶

Despite this threat, U.S.-South Korean forces continued to push into North Korea until reaching the capital of Pyongyang on October 20th. China followed through on its promise, joining the war just days later. Accounts from Mao and senior military leaders were unambiguous: China had little choice but to intervene—not only to aid its close neighbor and ally the DPRK, but because a U.S. troop presence so close to China's territory represented an unacceptable threat to China.¹⁷ China's decision to militarily intervene in the conflict was not taken lightly, however, and was made under the specter of a possible nuclear war with America.¹⁸

The following months were characterized by clashes between Chinese and American forces, pushing the United States and South Korean troops back across the 38th parallel. With no side gaining ground for several months following the retreat, peace talks between the two sides began in February of 1951. Eventually, a cease-fire was negotiated on July 27, 1953.

In surveying PRC writings, three conclusions stand out as they relate to China's experience with nuclear threats by the United States. First, the conclusion that U.S. nuclear threats were ineffective in deterring Chinese aggression or China's willingness to escalate hostilities. Second, the skepticism over the credibility of U.S. nuclear threats. And third, the assumption that Chinese military actions on the battlefield would prevent an all-out war with the United States.

On the first point, Chinese analysts highlight four instances of U.S. nuclear threats toward China and North Korea: (1) the deployment of nuclear-armed bombers to Asia in July 1950, which was made public by the *New York Times*; (2) President Truman's November 1950 public declaration at a press conference that the use of nuclear weapons was "always under active consideration"; (3) the deployment of B-29 bombers equipped with nuclear weapons to Guam on April 6, 1951; and (4) after armistice talks continued to stagnate through 1952, President Eisenhower's suggestion that he would authorize the use of nuclear weapons against China if an agreement could not be reached soon.¹⁹

In assessing these threats, what is noteworthy is that most scholars concluded that U.S. nuclear threats were an utter failure if the metric was to deter China from intervening in the conflict or constraining its People's Volunteer Army (PVA) from continuing to fight. As one academic put it, "this shows that the United States' initial deterrence failed.... It can be seen that this nuclear threat did not affect the decision-makers of China and North Korea at all."²⁰ The author also infers that "the nuclear threat did not significantly enable the United States to gain a psychological advantage on the battlefield and scare off its opponents."²¹ Indeed, a review of over a dozen scholarly Chinese academic articles yields a similar conclusion—that U.S. threats simply did not change the course of the conflict or deter China.²²

Regarding the second point, PRC scholars express skepticism over the credibility of U.S. nuclear threats and offer several justifications for their assessments. For example, Chinese leaders pointed to the large territory and dispersed population in China as "not conducive to being targeted by a nuclear weapon."²³ They highlighted concerns from U.S. allies and partners, who expressed "shock and dissatisfaction" at the prospect of the United States using nuclear weapons.²⁴ As a result, Chinese scholars believed that the United States faced a moral dilemma due to opposition from allies, which increased Mao's confidence that the United States was not serious about using nuclear weapons.

And third, Chinese authorities appeared to assume that carefully calibrated Chinese actions would successfully prevent an all-out war with the United States and prevent nuclear retaliation. Scholars emphasize four actions and assumptions, in particular: (1) use of the term “volunteers” (志愿者) to describe Chinese troops;²⁵ (2) declaratory statements, such as Mao’s before entering the war that “we at present do not want to fight a major war, nor do we intend to declare war on America.... We only intend to assist the Koreans’ revolutionary war under the name People’s Volunteers”;²⁶ (3) deliberate pauses between China’s five offenses during 1950–52 that would cool hostilities;²⁷ and (4) the deterrent value of a Chinese “people’s war.”

The above factors did not necessarily prove in the minds of some Chinese academics that the U.S. nuclear threat had no effect during the entire war and negotiation process. For example, during negotiations to end the conflict, Chinese historians acknowledged that China and North Korea “recognized the seriousness of the United States’ final position” and ability to escalate the conflict using nuclear weapons, which may have influenced Beijing and Pyongyang’s decision to make concessions in late May 1953.²⁸

Interestingly, one scholar questioned the extent to which Chinese leaders knew about U.S. nuclear posturing during the war: “It is unclear whether Chinese leaders knew that U.S. nuclear-armed B-29s were deployed in East Asia,” adding, “U.S. leaders have always tended to believe that their very subtle expressions of nuclear threats can be recognized by their opponents, but judging from the results, their effectiveness must be discounted.”²⁹

It is undeniable that the Korean War marked an important turning point for Chinese perceptions of nuclear deterrence, as it forced Mao to take seriously the threat posed by advanced military technologies, including nuclear weapons.³⁰ Indeed, Chinese scholars regard the Korean War as a critical moment in China’s overall strategic posture, leading China to pursue a nuclear weapons capability only a few years after the end of the conflict, despite economic hardship.

TAIWAN STRAIT CRISES OF 1954–55 AND 1958

Tensions between the PRC and the Republic of China (ROC) in the 1950s resulted in armed conflict over outlying islands in the Taiwan Strait. On two separate occasions during the 1950s, the PRC bombed islands controlled by the ROC. The United States, concerned about a possible PRC invasion of the ROC on Taiwan, responded by actively intervening on behalf of the ROC. The PRC and Mao, unsurprisingly, had a different perspective. Mao viewed the ROC-occupied islands off the southeast coast of the mainland as “stepping stones” to realize the ROC dream of “counterattacking the mainland.”³¹ With the support of the United States government, Mao viewed the Kuomintang (KMT) troops’ frequent military attacks and harassment activities on the southeastern coastal areas of the mainland as a precursor to invasion of the PRC.³²

Given the relatively long period of time between these two conflicts (1954–1958), and the complexity surrounding the lead-up to hostilities, a historical summary is necessary to set the stage for the lessons that China took away from these two conflicts.

Even before hostilities started, Mao believed the doctrinal seeds of U.S. nuclear coercion were sown on October 30, 1953, when U.S. President Eisenhower approved National Security Council Document No. 162/2, which reflected the spirit of Eisenhower’s “New Look” strategy of heavily investing in nuclear weapons as a tool to deter Soviet Communist expansion. Chinese analysts paid particular attention to the document’s desire for the United States to “maintain a superior position” in both the quantity and quality of nuclear weapons, and that “in the event of war, the United States will consider the use of nuclear weapons as well as other weapons in order to deter aggression.”³³

Soon after the PLA launched artillery attacks on the ROC-held Dachen Islands in 1954, President Eisenhower initiated discussions with the ROC authorities over a mutual defense commitment. On January 29, 1955, the U.S. Congress passed the Formosa Resolution, which authorized the United States to protect Taiwan from armed attack by the PLA, to include attacks on ROC-held islands near Mainland China. Then, between February and April

1955, President Eisenhower and his senior-most cabinet officials made a series of private and public statements affirming the U.S. conviction to use nuclear weapons against China to prevent military aggression against the ROC.³⁴

After the Dachens fell and the PLA consolidated control of all the offshore islands in the East China Sea, the PRC turned its attention to attacking ROC strongholds on Jinmen and Matsu islands in 1955. Although Mao ultimately ceased the bombing campaign of Jinmen in the summer of 1955, he and the PLA believed China emerged from the conflict having successfully deterred ROC "adventurism," while holding at bay the United States military. The conflict had many ramifications for China, to include the decision by Mao to commit to developing China's own nuclear weapons program.³⁵

From 1956 to 1958, the PLA and ROC continued to conduct tit-for-tat skirmishes near Jinmen. Starting in July 1958, the PLA Central Military Commission (CMC) put in place plans to bombard Jinmen, fearing that the ROC and United States were again hatching a plan to invade the mainland. This time, however, the PLA deployed its fighter jets and amphibious naval capabilities in its bombing campaign much more than in 1954–55. The result was another acute battle for air and sea control of Jinmen between the ROC and PRC, with the United States offering aid and support to the ROC troops. Importantly, the U.S. Seventh Fleet became quite active in supporting ROC troops on Jinmen, to include the deployment of six aircraft carriers, three heavy cruisers, 40 destroyers, and two air force divisions.³⁶

With this background as context, the overall takeaway by Chinese scholars on the role of nuclear weapons is that U.S. nuclear coercion in 1954–55 and in 1958 were largely unsuccessful and had little impact on China's decision to use force.³⁷ Here, four reasons are most prominent in the Chinese academic community regarding the U.S. failure: First, a lack of consensus among senior leaders in the United States over nuclear use during the conflicts; second, lack of support within the international community and amongst U.S. allies over the use of nuclear weapons by the United States; third, "adroit" Chinese strategies that limited escalation, especially the explicit order to not target U.S. forces; and fourth, China's strategic alliance with the Soviet Union.

On the first point, during the 1954–55 crisis, Chinese analysts highlight the fact that numerous high-level U.S. officials opposed the use of nuclear weapons for the sake of protecting coastal islands of questionable value to the United States.³⁸ It is for this reason that one academic said, "It can be seen that in the absence of consensus within the U.S. government and the lack of support from U.S. allies, [U.S. Secretary of State] Dulles' claim to use nuclear weapons against China in a crisis can only be interpreted as nuclear intimidation against China."³⁹ In other words, academics believed that Dulles and Eisenhower were issuing empty threats.

Second, in both the 1954–55 and 1958 cases, Chinese analysts underscored the significant opposition amongst key U.S. allies to the use of nuclear weapons. Indeed, Chinese historians believed that no U.S. allies would have supported the use of nuclear weapons in 1954–55, with only the United Kingdom expressing mild support for their use in 1958.⁴⁰ This theme of insufficient support among key U.S. allies was also present in the Korean War.

Third, Chinese academics focus on the battlefield decisions by Mao and senior PLA leaders in 1958 as creating conditions unsuitable for the United States to escalate hostilities or bomb the mainland with conventional or nuclear weapons. For example, scholars emphasized Mao's decision on September 3 to "stop shelling the island" in order to "gauge the American response."⁴¹ Another scholar notes Mao's decision to "not carry out landing operations on Jinmen" but instead to "hit and see, while completely maintaining the initiative."⁴² The scholar also mentions Mao's explicit orders for the PLA Navy and Air Force "not to enter the high seas to fight" and "not actively attack the U.S. military or personnel" as crucial components for controlling escalation and limiting U.S. intervention.⁴³

Finally, during the 1954–55 crisis, Chinese academics repeatedly highlighted the existence of the Sino-Soviet alliance as making the United States "more cautious" when considering a nuclear strike against China.⁴⁴ One scholar highlighted U.S. intelligence estimates at the time that predicted that in the event of a war with China, in order to maintain its alliance and avoid a military failure by China, the Soviet Union would "inevitably provide

necessary military assistance to China" and that "Eisenhower was convinced that a total war with China would also mean a total war with the Soviet Union."⁴⁵

In summary, Chinese academics assessed that nuclear weapons played a minimal role in the decision calculus of Mao, believing nuclear signaling by U.S. leaders to be largely empty rhetoric and that the risks associated with the United States deploying nuclear weapons were too great. On the other hand, U.S. nuclear threats undoubtedly were an ever-present factor in the back of Chinese military leaders' minds and may have even influenced Mao's decisions to limit the PLA's bombing campaign on Jinmen and not militarily seize the offshore island in 1958.

CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS OF 1962

The Cuban Missile Crisis was a seminal event in the history of nuclear escalation. For thirteen days in October 1962, the world's two largest nuclear powers engaged in a high-stakes confrontation and came precariously close to nuclear war. The leadership styles and personalities of U.S. president Kennedy and Soviet leader Khrushchev were tested and exposed. For Chinese analysts, the event represented an unprecedented case of crisis management to study and digest, of which little has been written in or translated into English.

In sum, four themes emerge from Chinese scholars that are pertinent to this study: First, the conclusion that the personal leadership styles and political biases of Khrushchev and Kennedy were factors in the outcome of the crisis; second, the assessment that the strategic balance favoring the United States at the time proved consequential; third, the impact of "coercive bargaining" on the negotiating positions of both parties; and fourth, the inherent unpredictability of nuclear brinksmanship.

On the first point, Chinese strategists were highly critical of Soviet leader Khrushchev. They called his decision-making "adventurist, reckless, and lacking sufficient discussion and scientific justification" based on a "pendant for ideology."⁴⁶ Therefore, when he encountered the United States, which had made "sufficient military preparations," the Soviet Union had no choice but to back down in the face of escalation by the United States.⁴⁷ In particular, Kennedy's decision to impose a blockade of Cuba was regarded by analysts as a stroke of strategic genius—a calculated, skillful action whose benefits outweighed the risks. As a result, the "rationalization, proceduralization, and practicality" of Kennedy's decision-making were identified by Chinese scholars as key factors to success.⁴⁸

Second, Chinese academics believed that the strategic balance favoring the United States at the time proved pivotal in compelling the Soviet Union to back down and eventually remove its missiles from Cuba. Chinese historians viewed the strategic balance as "greatly reducing the effect of Soviet deterrence, putting it in a disadvantageous position to credibly hold at risk the United States during escalation."⁴⁹ Scholars also assessed that the Soviet strategic disadvantage compelled it to deploy medium-range ballistic missiles in Cuba in the first place to, as Khrushchev explained, "play some role in achieving the so-called balance of power in the West."⁵⁰

Closely related to this point is the finding that Kennedy's employment of a "flexible response"—that is, an effort to control military escalation through the threat of large-scale nuclear retaliation should the adversary escalate beyond a particularly important threshold—was effective in raising the stakes for Khrushchev, presumably prompting him to retreat. It goes without saying that a nuclear strategy premised on "flexible response" is in direct tension with China's stated policy of a defensive, NFU approach to nuclear weapons.⁵¹

Third, Chinese strategists appear to assess that the United States was successful in carrying out coercive bargaining and brinksmanship against the Soviet Union.⁵² One scholar assessed that coercive bargaining and threatening actions to "deter the opponent from conceding important interests" are necessary steps for crisis management.⁵³ The author takes this logic a few steps further:

If one party refuses to take coercive bargaining actions in the face of a crisis, it will face a result that is neither beneficial to the opponent or unacceptable to himself. If, due to nuclear war, one dares not act due to the huge danger and allow the opponent's coercive bargaining to succeed,

not only does it fail to avoid war, *but it also encourages the opponent's greed and, in the end, the country whose fundamental interests are harmed by not reciprocating.* Thus, the party that fails to engage in coercive bargaining may end up being the party to provoke the war in the first place. [Emphasis added.]⁵⁴

The author appears to conclude that the U.S.-Soviet engagement in coercive bargaining paradoxically helped avoid war. In this sense, the author's analysis hews closely to Thomas Schelling's pathbreaking theory of a "threat that leaves something to chance."⁵⁵

Finally, some Chinese scholars highlight the unpredictable nature of nuclear crises, cautioning that the peaceful outcome of the crisis was not preordained. As one points out, "American traditionalist scholars in the past have consistently praised Kennedy's handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis, as if they thought the nuclear crisis could be managed. But the truth is, in the nuclear age, nuclear crises are unmanageable."⁵⁶ This assessment is supported by several other Chinese scholars, who question the assumption by some historians that both parties exerted much control over the outcome of the conflict and behavior of the other.⁵⁷

In summary, Chinese academics assessed that nuclear deterrence, to include threats of nuclear escalation and the strategic balance favoring the United States, were pivotal in the outcome of the conflict. In particular, Chinese historians judged that the different leadership styles in the United States and the Soviet Union were important factors that determined the favorable outcome for the United States.

SINO-SOVIET BORDER CONFLICT OF 1969

In March 1969, Chinese and Soviet troops engaged in armed hostilities along the western border over Zhenbao Island—a disputed piece of territory straddling the Ussuri River. Over seven months, the two sides absorbed several hundred casualties. More importantly, the crisis remains one of the only times in Chinese history that China's nuclear forces were placed on high alert.⁵⁸ The crisis also stands out as one of the only times that China, at the time a nuclear state, engaged in armed conflict with another nuclear-armed state. In that sense, the case holds important lessons on nuclear deterrence and escalation.

Four factors stand out as particularly relevant for nuclear signaling in this crisis. First, the limited influence a Soviet nuclear threat held during China's decision to use force in March 1969. Second, the reliance on Chinese conventional deterrence against the Soviet Union despite the fact that China possessed nuclear weapons. Third, China's belief that its actions on the battlefield would limit escalation. And fourth, the unprecedented dispersion of China's command and control of its military during hostilities.

First, early in the crisis, Chinese observers were optimistic about the possibility of a Soviet nuclear strike against China. As Logan and Torigian find, Chinese officials believed that nuclear threats were not credible, due to the political costs and nuclear retaliation risks they would generate.⁵⁹ Chinese strategists believed that even if the Soviets launched a nuclear attack, it would not decisively shift the course of a crisis or conflict. Instead, Chinese leaders consistently emphasized that any future Sino-Soviet conflict would be a "people's war" fought in the trenches, of which Mao remained confident in success. Senior Chinese officials repeated these lines throughout the crisis. Thus, nuclear weapons and the nuclear balance were simply not relevant factors in Chinese leaders' strategic calculations in the run-up to the conflict on Zhenbao.⁶⁰ As Michael S. Gerson noted, nuclear weapons had "little apparent influence" on China's decision to attack the Soviets on March 2.⁶¹ China was not emboldened by its rudimentary nuclear capability, but neither was it more cautious because of nuclear weapons.

However, some Soviet scholars assessed that Beijing believed that its nuclear capability would "prevent the Soviets from retaliating, regardless of Chinese actions."⁶² Given the ongoing Cultural Revolution in China, there were serious concerns in Moscow that China was becoming increasingly unpredictable and might be willing to take great risks.⁶³ As tensions escalated, Gerson finds that Brezhnev invoked a 1957 speech in which Mao spoke with "startling lightness and cynicism" about the potential destruction of "half of mankind" in a nuclear war.⁶⁴ As

previously noted, Moscow was surprised by the attack on Zhenbao, and the decision to escalate on March 15 and in the following months stemmed in part from its shock that Beijing was willing to attack a state with such overwhelming superiority in military power. As Gerson notes, Moscow may have “projected its own way of thinking onto Beijing, thereby concluding that China must have been encouraged by the attainment of even rudimentary nuclear capability.”⁶⁵

Second, China’s deterrence strategy was unique in that Beijing relied on conventional, rather than nuclear, threats.⁶⁶ This approach to conventional deterrence reflected a prevailing view in Beijing that China’s nascent nuclear arsenal could not effectively deter a Soviet nuclear attack. After all, China had been a nuclear power for less than five years, and its forces were small in number and highly vulnerable to a first strike.⁶⁷

Third, as with other cases in this report, China viewed the attack on March 2 as narrowly scoped and deliberately designed to signal resolve and deter future aggression while staying below the nuclear threshold. As Gerson finds, the historical record indicates that the nuclear balance had little effect on China’s decision to use force against the Soviet Union.⁶⁸

And fourth, in the lead-up to and during the conflict, Chinese concerns of a nuclear strike by the Soviets were more acute than the official Chinese historical record might suggest, leading to China’s dispersal of the command and control of its conventional and nuclear forces, an unprecedented move that to this day has not been repeated in Chinese military history. As Logan and Torigian reveal, Chinese concerns peaked in mid-October, as leaders prepared to welcome a Soviet delegation to Beijing for negotiations.⁶⁹ On October 15, China’s top general, Lin Biao, “personally chaired and summoned a Politburo meeting to research the current international situation and the Soviet strategic direction, and the meeting determined that, according to recent intelligence, some Soviet officials did indeed support executing a “surgical strike” on China’s nuclear installations before Beijing’s fledgling nuclear power presented a threat to the Soviet Union.⁷⁰ China’s senior leaders were given intelligence that led them to believe that the Soviet Union would possibly use the October 21 negotiations as a chance to launch a sudden attack.⁷¹

It was at this time that Mao took steps to prepare for a possible Soviet nuclear attack. In September, senior military leaders “ordered the removal of nonessential personnel from China’s missile test base in the western part of the country.”⁷² According to Logan and Torigian, one account of the decision read, “The base stored a great deal of explosives so that if the Soviet Union invaded, they could blow up the test site. Individuals not involved in the test as well as family members were all removed.”⁷³

This series of events culminated in Lin Biao issuing “Order No. 1,” setting in motion preparations for war and a possible counter-attack.⁷⁴ The instructions also placed China’s nuclear forces on alert for what appears to be the first and only time in history.⁷⁵ All PLA commanders and units purportedly entered command centers, and the entire military was put on a “level one” alert.⁷⁶

In summary, this case study reveals a tension between the official Chinese historical record and the actions taken by senior Chinese leaders. Chinese historians, and Mao himself, seemed to view Chinese military actions as sufficiently narrow in scope to signal Chinese resolve while staying below a nuclear threshold. Up until the end of the conflict, the Chinese narrative was that there was little concern in Beijing that the Soviet Union would act on Soviet nuclear threats towards China. However, the unprecedented step in the fall of 1969 to disperse China’s senior-most civilian and military leaders to prepare for a possible Soviet nuclear attack suggests significant concern by Mao that an attack might actually occur. Thus, it is likely that Soviet nuclear threats were a factor in China’s calculus and may have affected the eventual de-escalations of hostilities.

RECENT CHINA-INDIA BORDER CONFLICTS AND THE ROLE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

This case study examined the role of nuclear deterrence between China and India during two recent crises: the Doklam crisis of 2017 and the Galwan crisis of 2020. It was chosen as a recent example of conflict involving China and another nuclear-armed state. While the case was helpful in shedding light on the path to conflict and the behavior of both states in conflict management and resolution, it did not ultimately reveal any noteworthy findings related to nuclear escalation or signaling. Thus, due to space limitations and a lack of findings directly relevant to DTRA, the case was moved to an appendix at the end of the report.

KEY FINDINGS

The above analysis yields several important findings on how China views nuclear crises.

NUCLEAR DETERRENCE MATTERED LITTLE IN CHINA'S USE OF FORCE CALCULUS

China assesses that the historical role of nuclear weapons was, for the most part, a minor factor in its calculus to use force and, similarly, in other countries' decisions to use force. In the cases in which China was directly involved in a military conflict, China crafted a narrative that other countries' nuclear escalation or signaling of intent to engage in nuclear escalation did not greatly influence the willingness of China to de-escalate the conflict. However, an important caveat in this assessment is that almost all cases in this study were sufficiently limited in their aims as to not approach a nuclear threshold. While China was keenly aware of the presence of nuclear weapons and carefully weighed the risks of possible nuclear retaliation before making the decision to use force in a conflict, the nuclear deterrent of the adversary mattered little in China's decision to use force.

NUCLEAR COERCION AGAINST CHINA WAS INEFFECTIVE AFTER THE ONSET OF HOSTILITIES

In conflicts involving China, Chinese scholars are fairly uniform in their assessment that after the initial use of force in a conflict, nuclear coercion, or "saber-rattling," by the adversary was generally not effective in managing escalation. Chinese scholars generally believe signals by adversaries that threatened China with nuclear weapons lacked credibility, either because of China's judgment of the international opprobrium that would follow or due to domestic factors inhibiting nuclear use on the battlefield. This was especially true in Chinese analysts' eyes during the Korean War and the First and Second Taiwan Strait Crises, during which Mao appeared to put little stock in nuclear threats from Washington. Similarly, in almost all cases, Mao also believed that China's use of force was sufficiently limited in scope so as to inherently constrain the likelihood that China's actions would compel adversaries to use nuclear weapons.

It should be emphasized, however, that China's scholarly community may be engaging in historical revisionism. Indeed, there is the possibility that a selective treatment of the history of nuclear escalation involving China may belie deep internal anxiety in Beijing about being vulnerable to nuclear manipulation. This was abundantly clear in 1969, for example, when Mao ordered all senior military commanders to disperse to strategic locations throughout China and elevate China's nuclear readiness. The 1969 case may suggest that China's significant preparations for the Soviet Union's use of nuclear weapons against it indicates that these threats mattered a great deal to Beijing and may have influenced Mao's decision to eventually end hostilities.

On the other hand, in cases where China was not a participant in a conflict, as in the Cuban Missile Crisis, Chinese historians came to a very different conclusion. For example, most assessed that the United States successfully

employed nuclear escalation, coercive bargaining, and brinksmanship, forcing the Soviet Union to back down. As will be discussed next, Chinese academics judged that this success was due to President Kennedy's decision-making and the strategic balance that favored the United States at the time.

STRATEGIC BALANCE CALCULUS WAS INFLUENTIAL IN THE OUTCOME OF CERTAIN CONFLICTS

Chinese assessments of the Cuban Missile Crisis stand out for their realpolitik flavor, suggesting that the strategic balance between two adversaries before and during a military conflict matters. Most Chinese analysts believed that the strategic balance that favored the United States at the time was a critical factor in the favorable outcome for Washington. Chinese analysts also assessed that U.S. brinksmanship—namely, the imposition of a blockade of Cuba—was a stroke of strategic genius by U.S. president Kennedy that allowed the United States to emerge from the crisis victorious and forced the Soviet Union to de-escalate the standoff and eventually remove its missiles from Cuba. The two ingredients that allowed Kennedy to successfully pull off the blockade, according to Chinese scholars, were, first, a U.S. decision-making process that emphasized “rationalization, proceduralization, and practicality,” and, second, the “rash, unitary, penchant for ideology” crisis management style of Khrushchev and the Soviet bureaucracy.

This mirrors scholarship on the Cuban Missile Crisis, which finds, for example, that the “direct effect [of the strategic nuclear balance] on the United States was apparently minimal. But a strong, although somewhat speculative, case can be made that Soviet policy was very much influenced by the strategic balance.”⁷⁷ Such concepts may well have shaped Khrushchev's strategic calculus through logics regarding windows of opportunity and vulnerability.⁷⁸

FEARS OF NUCLEAR “BLACKMAIL” REMAIN A POWERFUL NARRATIVE IN MODERN CHINESE THINKING

Preventing the nuclear “blackmail” of China closely followed the deterrence of nuclear aggression as a strategic objective, in large part because Beijing felt itself victimized by U.S. and Soviet nuclear threats at various moments during the early Cold War when it did not have nuclear weapons. Thus, defeating nuclear blackmail constituted an important motivation underlying China's quest for the bomb during the Cold War. Such a psyche also informs modern Chinese nuclear strategy. While there are numerous drivers for China's recent nuclear expansion, historical memories of nuclear blackmail at the hands of nuclear-armed powers likely motivate China's strategy of ensuring, and expanding, a true second-strike capability.

RETAINING A “MINIMUM MEANS OF REPRISAL” MATTERS TO DETER ADVERSARY BEHAVIOR

After 1964, Chinese scholars assessed that a minimum nuclear deterrent, by its very presence and irrespective of specific vulnerabilities, serves to induce caution on the part of stronger rivals like the United States and the Soviet Union even during serious crises. This became evident when the more-powerful Soviet Union was compelled to stay its hand in the face of serious temptations to attack what were obviously inferior Chinese nuclear forces during the acute Sino-Soviet crisis of 1969. Because the “minimum means of reprisal,” when combined with the threat of an endless “people's war,” proved adequate for effective deterrence against both nuclear attacks and intimidation in the real world of international politics, Maoist China avoided pursuing a maximum nuclear force that was judged to be both wasteful and unnecessary by Chinese strategists at the time.

CHINA'S LACK OF EXPERIENCE IN NUCLEAR ESCALATION MAY LEAD TO MISCALCULATION

Since China first conducted a nuclear test in 1964, there are only two cases in this study in which it engaged in hostilities with another nuclear-armed state and absorbed casualties: the Sino-Soviet Chinese conflict of 1969 and the Sino-Indian border skirmish of 2020–21. In both cases, Chinese historians concluded that China emerged from these conflicts and successfully achieved its limited war aims while controlling escalation in the nuclear domain. However, such confidence on the Chinese side may be misplaced and fails to account for the myriad factors influencing the decision of foreign actors not to retaliate with nuclear weapons.

In particular, Chinese scholarship on crisis management may bleed into China's views on nuclear crises. There is a danger that China's confidence in its ability to manage crises, or gain the upper hand after a crisis, could also be applied to a limited set of instances in which China successfully managed a nuclear crisis. PRC military strategists firmly believe that China can successfully control escalation by applying a uniquely Chinese set of scientific principles, coupled with advanced military technology, to manipulate adversary risk assessments.⁷⁹ Due to an overreliance on the theoretical underpinnings of escalation management, China believes it has the ability to control all facets of military escalation, to include nuclear escalation. This may lead PRC policymakers to be overconfident in their ability to prevail in a conflict with the United States.

THE POTENTIAL TO MISREAD NUCLEAR SIGNALS REMAINS WORRISOME

Several assessments by Chinese scholars who expressed skepticism that Chinese leaders received the intended nuclear signaling by the United States raise questions over a "perception gap" within China's strategic bureaucracy. As one Chinese scholar noted, "it is unclear whether Chinese leaders knew that U.S. nuclear-armed B-29s were deployed in East Asia," adding that "U.S. leaders have always had a tendency to believe that their very subtle expressions of nuclear threats can be recognized by their opponents, but judging from the results, their effectiveness must be questioned."⁸⁰ This lends credence to the work of scholars like Christopher Twomey, who argues that doctrinal differences between China and the United States have led to deterrence failures, to include during the Korean War.⁸¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings above have several direct implications for the United States. Below are key, actionable recommendations for DTRA based on the findings of the study.

Recommendation: *Fund studies that involve Chinese historians to guide current U.S. government "red team" thinking on Chinese nuclear escalation.*

DTRA should take the lead in funding studies and tabletop exercises that enable the U.S. government and intelligence community to use Chinese history as a guide to inform "red team" thinking.

The U.S. government invests significant resources in "red teaming" how China might employ nuclear weapons in a crisis. However, much of this thinking is divorced from, or not adequately applied to, how China has historically behaved in a crisis with a nuclear-armed adversary. Admittedly, there is much that is unknown about China's calculus in how it may approach nuclear crises with the United States in the future. However, this study suggests China has derived specific lessons from past nuclear crises that will likely influence how it might approach a future nuclear crisis. Namely, China is keenly aware of its asymmetric disadvantages in the strategic domain vis-à-vis the United States and thus will likely approach a nuclear crisis with the United States with caution and restraint, despite its recent quantitative increase in warheads. This suggests Beijing will continue to rely on non-nuclear capabilities with strategic effects to escalate and demonstrate resolve in the early stages of conflict, as it has in past crises. China's fundamental approach to nuclear weapons as an instrument of coercion has not changed, and

it views them as an option of last resort only to be employed in extreme circumstances. While it may be the case that Chinese views of nuclear escalation and risk aversion may change as it attains more nuclear weapons, for the time being, China has not abandoned its traditional, conservative approach to nuclear strategy. Thus, DTRA, in collaboration with the DoD and the intelligence community, should seek more opportunities to fund studies and tabletop exercises that incorporate a wider variety of subject matter experts (SMEs) with a background in Chinese nuclear history.

Recommendation: *Fund Track 2 dialogues with Chinese institutions about the risks of nuclear escalation.*

DTRA has a unique history of funding Track 2 dialogues on nuclear dynamics with Chinese think tanks and academic institutes. Given this unique history, and while progress on Track 1 dialogues with China on arms control remains stalled, DTRA should consider funding new Track 2 dialogues with Chinese institutions. There exists a large and yawning gap between U.S. and Chinese views on nuclear strategy and arms control. Each views the other as engaging in a peacetime buildup that threatens the other's core national interests. And each is bolstering a nuclear posture premised on the likely moves the other could make to undermine strategic stability. Such an environment breeds miscalculation and misperceptions of the other's actions and motives, which makes strategic stability more precarious. Unofficial dialogues offer avenues to exchange views and, hopefully, gain a better understanding of each other's concerns. They are not a panacea, however, and need to occur in tandem with tangible efforts at modernizing the United States' strategic deterrent capability.

Recommendation: *Push for arms control and risk reduction measures with China.*

DTRA should join the various stakeholders within the U.S. government in advocating for arms control with China, bearing in mind that arms control in the future will probably look different from how it evolved with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Because of that experience, the United States tends to define arms control narrowly—as legally binding, bilateral treaties that produce symmetrical reductions in nuclear forces. But an arms control agreement with China will likely not comprise the same form or structure as those between the United States and the Soviet Union. Arms control can be conceptualized much more broadly to include all forms of military cooperation between potential enemies in the interest of reducing the likelihood of a war. An arms control process with China could seek to address not only nuclear weapons but also emerging technologies in the cyber and space domains that are likely to affect nuclear stability. There are a variety of credible and creative means by which the United States might begin to integrate China into an arms control framework: convening bilateral strategic stability talks with China, expanding talks with Russia to include China, developing a bilateral prelaunch missile notification regime with China, inviting China to observe a New START inspection, establishing a link between the U.S. Nuclear Risk Reduction Center and its Chinese counterpart, and developing norms in outer space.

Recommendation: *Invest in more Chinese-language primary source materials.*

While this study sheds new light on China's views of nuclear coercion, the continued availability of Chinese-language resources appears more challenging than in the past. This is especially the case for sources from PLA research organizations and CCP reports on how China views nuclear weapons, which, even during the course of this research, were restricted by databases in mainland China.

DTRA would benefit from taking the lead to fund additional sources of Chinese-language materials for the U.S. government. In order to gain a better understanding of how China perceives nuclear strategy and crises, unfettered access to Chinese-language materials remains a crucial ingredient to sustain U.S. government understanding of China's nuclear strategy. Failure to better understand Chinese thinking about past nuclear crises and how this thinking might inform China's approach to a showdown with another nuclear power could increase the risks of miscalculation, miscommunication, or inadvertent escalation in the event of a future regional security crisis over any one of several potential flashpoints between the United States and China.

APPENDIX: RECENT CHINA-INDIA BORDER CONFLICTS AND THE ROLE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

India and China have had long-standing civilizational links for over two millennia. These were forged through extensive people-to-people exchanges that included pilgrims, scholars, traders, and diplomats. Prior to the 10th century, Buddhist connections were key, and in later years, as maritime technologies developed, commercial interactions gained salience.

These links broke down during India's colonial period, and later encounters reflected the strains of the exploitative imperial political economy. The Opium Wars stand out as an example.⁸² During the mid-20th century, as both emerged into the modern era, India having gained independence from British rule and China with the Maoist revolution, they faced similar developmental challenges but saw the postwar world differently. They also inherited border differences that generated mistrust, leading to the first military conflict in 1962. This dispute remains unresolved and, in recent years, has resurfaced, leading to casualties in 2020 after 45 years of relative calm.

India-China relations have also been colored by the prevailing winds of geopolitics. These have shaped policy choices as leaders in both countries sought to exploit them for their benefit. In the 21st century, with the geopolitical and geoeconomic center of gravity shifting from the Euro-Atlantic to Asia, the India-China relationship assumes regional and global significance. Both countries are nuclear-weapon states with large military forces, though China enjoys a significant qualitative edge.

This appendix examines the two recent crises, the Doklam crisis of 2017 and the Galwan crisis of 2020, and explores the role of nuclear deterrence as these unfolded. The face-offs began in Doklam and Galwan, but the two are separated by nearly 2,500 kilometers, as the maps in this appendix make clear.

This introduction is followed by six sections. Section one introduces the modern bilateral relationship and the suspicions and misperceptions leading to the boundary dispute and the conflict in 1962. Thereafter, the relationship remained frozen for a quarter-century. A new chapter began in 1988 that enabled better border management, and other dimensions of the relationship were revived. However, the resolution of the boundary differences proved elusive, and the border management mechanisms failed to prevent increasing incursions across the Line of Actual Control (LAC), eventually leading to the Doklam and Galwan crises.

Section two introduces the nuclear factor and explores its impact on the relationship, beginning with the Chinese test in 1964. Coming after the 1962 conflict, it affected India's internal debates and the decision not to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Growing evidence of Chinese cooperation with Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs during the 1980s and other geopolitical developments led to India's nuclear tests in 1998. Changing geopolitics brought India and the United States closer, reflected in the civil nuclear cooperation agreement in 2008. China's consequent recalibration of its relations with India became perceptible in the following decade.

Section three looks at the regional and geopolitical backdrop to the key developments in India-China relations. The Cuban Missile Crisis was unfolding while the 1962 conflict broke out. Pakistan's role in midwifing the U.S. opening to China in 1971 brought the three countries closer, while India leaned toward the Soviet Union during the Bangladesh crisis. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and Pakistan's emergence as a frontline state provided the cover for China to proliferate into South Asia. Post-2008, the change in China's external posture became manifest, beginning with the new maps containing the nine-dash line in the South China Sea (now updated as a ten-dash line).⁸³ The emergence of the Quad, consisting of the United States, Australia, Japan, and India, with its emphasis on a free and open Indo-Pacific, added to Chinese concerns. During the 2020s, the U.S.-China rivalry has sharpened, coinciding with the downturn in India-China relations.

The 2017 Doklam crisis forms the substance of section four. The Doklam plateau is the trijunction between Bhutan, China, and India. Bhutan has an unresolved boundary with China, and since 1984, the two have engaged in

multiple rounds of talks. The standoff lasted 73 days and tested India-Bhutan relations. A positive outcome was the institution of the annual, informal summits, but this failed to prevent the 2020 Galwan crisis, explored in section five.

Since both sides have relied on the calibrated use of media, these sections explore how political and nuclear signaling has taken place and how it has been perceived by the other side. The crisis persists despite multiple rounds of talks at different levels. Some disengagement has taken place but not de-escalation, leading to large formations deployed at icy heights of 15,000 feet and more, even as India builds up supply lines and border infrastructure, an area in which China has a head start. Geopolitical developments, such as COVID-19, the growing salience of the Quad, India's rejection of the Belt and Road Initiative, a growing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean, and the emergence of wolf-warrior diplomacy, have prevented a resolution.

The concluding section six attempts to draw out the current trend lines into the future despite the uncertainties posed by elections in India, defense plans in both countries, lessons that China may draw from the ongoing Ukraine war, possibilities of shifts in Chinese nuclear doctrine after two decades of modernization, and ongoing infrastructure development in the border areas. These raise the prospects of more incursions and, therefore, possibilities for inadvertent or deliberate escalation. At a broader level, for the United States, China is now described as a "pacing challenge," and China has come to believe that the United States is determined to prevent its peaceful rise.⁸⁴ The Taiwan Strait is increasingly described as a potential flashpoint.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SINO-INDIAN CONFLICT

The relationship between India and China since the late 1940s can be divided into four periods: the first from 1947 to the 1962 conflict; the freeze from 1962 to 1988; the gradual rebuilding of ties from 1988 until the Galwan crisis in 2020; and the post-2020 phase since the breakdown of the old *modus vivendi*.

India emerged as an independent country on August 15, 1947, and the People's Republic of China was established on October 1, 1949. On April 1, 1950, India established diplomatic relations with China, becoming the first non-Communist Asian state to do so. Relations between the two large Asian countries began on a positive note, as both saw and recognized each other as civilizational states. However, the suspicions of the colonial-era legacy soon emerged to cast a shadow.

As an imperial power, British India saw Tibet as a vital buffer state, under Chinese suzerainty but independent, and had maintained diplomatic, trade, and military ties with Lhasa. British India formalized its boundary with Tibet in a tripartite conference in 1914, with China present. The McMohan line (named after Foreign Secretary Henry McMohan) came into existence.⁸⁵ The map accompanying the tripartite agreement delineated the 3,488-kilometer border from the eastern sector in the Assam Himalayas, continuing westward and onto the western sector from Aksai Chin along the Karakoram range to the Wakhan corridor, a trijunction of China, Afghanistan, and British India. Initially, the Chinese representative initialed the agreement and the maps but then repudiated the maps, primarily on account of the boundary between Tibet and China.⁸⁶ The McMohan line in the western sector was based on the Ardagh-Johnson line, the alignment drawn in 1865 by W.H. Johnson of the Survey of India and approved by Major General Sir John Ardagh in London. Given the remote area of Aksai Chin in west Tibet, the British never made any efforts to extend their administrative control over it.

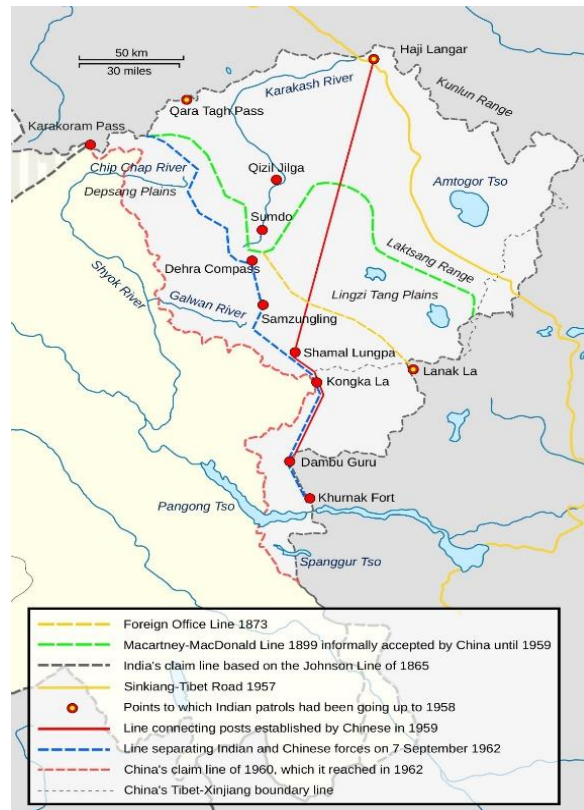


Figure 1: Aksai Chin Sino-Indian border map

China's military operation for the "liberation of Tibet" began in October 1950, and less than a year later, it had been subjugated and forced to accept China's sovereignty.⁸⁷ India had inherited the British office in Lhasa. In the 1952–53 talks, India did not seek formal acceptance of the McMahon line as the boundary, contenting itself with issuing formal maps indicating its new boundaries, and in 1954, it gave up its rights in Tibet, recognizing it as a region of China.⁸⁸ In 1954, the Panchsheel agreement, which set out the five principles of peaceful coexistence, was signed, generating expectations that any differences would be resolved peacefully.

India had established administrative jurisdiction in Tawang in the eastern sector up to the McMahon line by 1951, as there was a resident population in the region. The same was not done in the western sector of Aksai Chin. China issued fresh maps in 1956, claiming Tawang in the east, Barahoti in the middle sector near the trijunction of Nepal, India, and China, and Aksai Chin in the west. Border incursions grew, but talks remained inconclusive. In 1957, India learned of the newly constructed G-219 highway connecting Xinjiang (Yarkand) to Tibet (Gartok), passing through Aksai Chin. Even as India protested, by 1959, China took the position that the boundary with India had never been delineated and the McMahon line was an illegitimate product of British imperialism.⁸⁹

Relations worsened when India gave asylum to the Dalai Lama in March 1959, as he fled Lhasa following the uprising in 1958 that was brutally put down by China. Clashes began to occur in the border areas, beginning with Longju and Kongka Pass, that led to casualties. The small units that India sought to position in the forward areas were not backed by the requisite supply chains and were seen by China as provocations. Conflict broke out on October 20, 1962. Indian forces were routed and suffered a humiliating defeat. On November 21, China announced a unilateral ceasefire, withdrawing its forces north of the McMahon line in the east but retaining control up to its claim line in Aksai Chin.



Figure 2: India-China disputed areas⁹⁰

Indian leadership, particularly Prime Minister Nehru, had been naive and failed to assess the Chinese leadership's domestic challenges. The complacency that India would enjoy both U.S. and Soviet support in case of aggression was shattered by the prevailing geopolitics that left India isolated. Both domestic and geopolitical factors were key in each of the four phases of the bilateral relationship, as detailed in section four. India's defeat had a further negative impact on its relations with its western adversary, Pakistan.

Following the 1962 conflict, relations went into a deep freeze. A thaw occurred in 1976, when diplomatic relations were re-established. However, once again, domestic developments in both countries (Chairman Mao's death and the ensuing power struggle in China and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi losing the 1977 election in India) and geopolitical developments, like the U.S.-China normalization beginning in 1972 and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, kept India-China relations in a semi-frozen state for another decade. During this period, China also emerged as a nuclear-weapon state in 1964 and aided Pakistan's nuclear program, explored in section three.

The third phase began in 1988 with a visit from Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and lasted until 2020. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China had embarked on its "four modernizations," and from 1991, India too began to liberalize its hitherto closed economy.⁹¹ Globally, the Cold War ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The new modus vivendi was to put the boundary dispute on the backburner and focus instead on building the economic, commercial, and cultural aspects of the relationship to create, over a period, a more conducive environment that would permit both countries to address the boundary issue. The India-China Joint Working Group on the boundary question was set up to keep the matter under review.⁹²

It is reasonable to conclude from this pragmatic approach that since neither side was in a position in 1988 to achieve an acceptable solution to the boundary dispute, both sides decided to pursue a conciliatory path.⁹³

The first major development was the 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas.⁹⁴ This agreement committed both to resolving the boundary question "through peaceful and friendly consultations" and, pending an ultimate solution, to "strictly respect and observe the line of actual control between the two sides." Since there was no agreed delineation of the LAC, the agreement added that in "case the personnel of one side cross the LAC, upon being cautioned by the other side, they shall immediately pull back to their own side" and, if necessary, "shall jointly check and determine the segments of the line of actual control where they have different views as to its alignment."⁹⁵

This was followed by the 1996 Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas.⁹⁶ This introduced constraints on the size and nature of military exercises in the border areas while committing them to a reduction in military presence. Restrictions were placed on the use or carriage of firearms, which were observed until 2020. Realizing the importance of early clarification of the LAC, both sides also agreed to speed up the process.

However, the Joint Working Group on the boundary question was a technical group and was at a standstill by the end of the 1990s. It was wound down, and a new dialogue channel of special representatives (SRs) was set up in 2003 "to explore from the political perspective of the overall bilateral relationship the framework of a boundary settlement."⁹⁷ 22 rounds of talks took place between the Indian National Security Adviser and the Chinese State Councilor, the two designated SRs.⁹⁸ In 2004, a three-step formula was agreed upon: establishing political parameters and guiding principles, establishing the framework for a final package settlement, and delineating and demarcating the boundary.⁹⁹

The first step concluded the following year with the Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question. The principles identified were "mutual and equal security," aligning the boundary "along well-defined and easily identifiable natural geographical features," and safeguarding the interests of "settled populations in border areas."¹⁰⁰ In the eastern sector, China would accept that Arunachal Pradesh, with a settled population, was part of India, thereby implicitly accepting the McMahon line; in the western sector, India would adjust its claims so that Chinese connectivity through Aksai Chin would be secured with an alignment along geographical features.

The 2005 agreement proved to be the high point, and as the SR's agenda broadened, the focus on the boundary got diluted. Meanwhile, incursions across the LAC were growing, leading to additional mechanisms. A protocol to the 1996 agreement was finalized in 2005 that elaborated the modalities of implementation; another agreement in 2012 established a working mechanism at the official diplomatic level to study the conduct and coordination of exchanges between military personnel.¹⁰¹

As incursions grew, standoffs became more pronounced, involving larger numbers of soldiers and lasting longer. The first of the prolonged standoffs happened in April 2013, when the PLA set up five tents in the Depsang Plains (Raki Nala), 19 kilometers inside the Indian alignment of the LAC. Two days later, on April 17, India set up tents 300 meters away, encircling the Chinese encampment. Premier Li Keqiang's visit was scheduled for May 18, and India threatened to call off the visit. The standoff lasted three weeks, and on May 6, both encampments were removed based on mutual agreement. A Border Defense Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) was concluded that enjoined both sides not to follow each other's patrols and exercise restraint.¹⁰²

The Depsang Plain lies on the eastern edge of the Siachen Glacier, where Indian and Pakistani troops have been locked in a standoff since 1984. It is south of the reactivated Daulat Beg Oldie Advanced Landing Ground and straddles the Darbuk–Shyok–Daulat Beg Oldie road, a recently constructed all-weather vital supply route.



Figure 3: China-India western sector border¹⁰³

The BDCA failed to prevent the next incident at Chumar (southeastern Ladakh) in September 2014. The provocation was the Chinese attempt to build a road from Chepzi to Chumar that would block Indian access to the ridge at Tible-Mane. Within days, India had moved a brigade to Chumar, with more than twice the number of Chinese soldiers then present. Three days later, on September 17, President Xi Jinping was scheduled to come to India, barely four months after Narendra Modi had taken over as prime minister. Both sides doubled troop strength even as the visit proceeded. Indian media leaks indicated that Modi had conveyed India's stand in private meetings, and days after the visit, on September 26, the troops withdrew, defusing the crisis. Hypotheses that President Xi did not have full authority over the PLA or that he was testing Modi did the rounds.¹⁰⁴

While standoffs continued in Burtse and Pangong Tso in the western sector, the next major marker of the deteriorating border situation occurred at the Doklam plateau, the trijunction between Bhutan, China, and India. This is covered in section five. The Doklam standoff led to the institution of annual, informal summits that permitted the two leaders to spend a significant amount of time together. Wuhan in 2018 and Mamallapuram in 2019 provided the picturesque locales for the meetings. However, concrete outcomes were missing.

The 2020 crisis in the eastern sector in Ladakh began in April but escalated on the night of June 15, leading to a skirmish at Galwan that resulted in 20 Indian casualties and, according to PLA, four PLA troops, the first casualties in 45 years.¹⁰⁵ The crisis, covered in section six, continues, with both sides maintaining a permanent presence of nearly 50,000 soldiers, becoming the new normal. The presence along the LAC in the eastern sector has also been strengthened.

CHINA'S NUCLEAR DETERRENT AND IMPACT ON SINO-INDIA RELATIONS

Taiwan, a hundred miles off the Chinese coast, had been a Japanese colony since 1895 and was reunited briefly with the mainland under the Kuomintang government in 1945 following Japan's defeat in World War II. With the takeover of the mainland by the Maoists in 1949, the Kuomintang retreated to Taiwan, and the United States recognized it as the legitimate government of mainland China. Antagonism with the United States grew with the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. The Taiwan crisis became the catalyst for China's decision to go nuclear.

The First Taiwan Strait Crisis was sparked in 1954 when China began bombarding Jinmen (Quemoy) and Matsu (Mazu), two islands occupied by the Kuomintang but much closer to the mainland. The United States increased forces in the region and deployed naval vessels to escort supply ships for the beleaguered islands. It was later revealed that the use of nuclear weapons was considered. A Mutual Defense Treaty with Taiwan was concluded, which made China pause, but after three years of talks, a second crisis erupted in 1958.¹⁰⁶

Chairman Mao authorized the making of a Chinese nuclear bomb, confident that the Soviet Union would be supportive. Initially, the Soviets provided full technical assistance, but Khrushchev found Mao's rhetoric troubling and, by 1959, formally ended the cooperation. It took China another five years, and, on October 16, 1964, it successfully detonated a 22-kiloton nuclear device at the Lop Nor site. By mid-1967, China surprised the world by exploding its first thermonuclear device.

Coming two years after India's humiliating defeat, the 1964 test perhaps had its loudest reverberation in Delhi. Nehru never recovered from the political bruising and died in May 1964, leading to a period of political uncertainty and indecision. India's reaction to the test was low key, highlighting "the importance of general and complete disarmament" and "urging China to cease testing."¹⁰⁷ In 1963, the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) was concluded, banning atmospheric testing and raising expectations that a comprehensive treaty could soon follow. China had not joined the PTBT and continued atmospheric testing until 1980.

India's second war with Pakistan erupted in 1965, and in January 1966, Prime Minister Shastri died suddenly in Tashkent at a Soviet-brokered summit with Pakistani president Ayub Khan, where a peace deal between the two was negotiated. Weeks later, the architect of India's nuclear program since 1948, renowned physicist Dr. Homi Bhabha, died in an air crash over the Alps.

Though it was the first Asian country to set up a nuclear research reactor in 1956 and to start a power reactor program in 1963, India had shied away from following the obvious military path. In 1967, an unsure Indian leadership sought security assurances from London, Moscow, Paris, and Washington in order to overcome its reservation about the NPT but received cold comfort.¹⁰⁸ In 1969, the Indian parliament endorsed the government's decision not to sign the NPT.¹⁰⁹ India's "nuclear option" was born and became an article of faith.

India's capability was demonstrated by conducting an underground test in 1974, labeled a peaceful nuclear explosion (PNE). Clearly, India misjudged the international community's reaction even though both the United States and the Soviet Union had active PNE programs¹¹⁰ and the NPT too had a provision for PNEs¹¹¹ that was never invoked. China's reaction was muted and mixed, accepting it as an exercise of the sovereign right to develop peaceful nuclear power while also citing its negative implications for Pakistan and criticizing Indian expansionism.¹¹²

Meanwhile, the 1971 war (the third after 1947 and 1965) between India and Pakistan culminated with East Pakistan seceding and emerging as independent Bangladesh. It generated a concerted move in Islamabad to develop a nuclear bomb, which India's 1974 PNE gave further urgency.

China-Pakistan relations had started warming up after the 1962 conflict. Even though Kashmir was a disputed territory, China concluded a boundary agreement with Pakistan in 1963. Pakistan, which was in occupation of part of the disputed territory of Kashmir, ceded 5,180 square kilometers of the Shaksgam Valley in the north, in the Karakoram ranges. Later, this facilitated the construction of the Karakoram highway, providing direct land connectivity between both countries.

After Mao's death in 1976, a prolonged power struggle erupted in China, and it took Deng Xiaoping nearly six years to emerge as the undisputed leader. The nascent cooperation between the two in the nuclear-weapon field began to gather momentum during the 1980s as Pakistan helped broker a Chinese deal with Saudi Arabia for CSS-2 Chinese missiles. The tested design of the CHIC-4 nuclear device was shared with Pakistan, and cold tests were conducted. On May 26, 1990, a Pakistani device based on the Chinese design was physically tested at the Lop Nor

site.¹¹³ Indian agencies had been following this cooperation and flagging growing concerns about a new nuclear-armed adversary on the western border.

With the Soviet exit from Afghanistan in 1989, the United States could no longer afford to ignore growing cooperation between the two in both the nuclear and missile sectors. The United States subjected both China and Pakistan to sanctions, but it was too late. By Indian assessment, Pakistan was an undeclared nuclear-weapon state. Eventually, India undertook a series of nuclear tests in May 1998, and this time it declared itself a nuclear-weapon state. Pakistan followed suit within a fortnight.

The nuclear tests led to a two-year period of intense engagement between India and the United States, going a long way in generating a better appreciation of India's security concerns in Washington.¹¹⁴ China evidently found this growing relationship, accompanied by a maritime partnership in the Indian Ocean in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami, a matter of growing concern. While it was hesitant about being the only one to block the special waiver the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) granted India in 2008 (the NSG makes decisions by consensus), by 2016, it had no such qualms and has since blocked India's NSG membership. In recent years, it has also rejected any nuclear-related talks with India on the basis that the NPT recognizes only five nuclear-weapon states.

However, the fact that both China and India profess a no-first-use doctrine has ensured that any nuclear-related rhetoric has been low-key, in sharp contrast to India-Pakistan crises. Nevertheless, China's nuclear modernization has generated fresh concerns. Further, in 1998, when India first began to talk of the challenge of two armed adversaries, there were few takers. Today, with the United States describing Russia as a "disruptive power"¹¹⁵ and China as a "pacing power,"¹¹⁶ there is better appreciation of the complexity of ensuring robust nuclear deterrence.

INDIA'S NUCLEAR MODERNIZATION AND PRC REACTIONS

The nuclear dimension of the India-China relationship was colored by domestic, regional, and geopolitical developments. During the first phase (1947–62), the two countries were coming to terms with their newfound independence. The Indian leadership had achieved independence through a non-violent movement and maintained cordial relations with the United Kingdom following a peaceful transfer of power. In China's case, the Kuomintang government that fought Japan in World War II was ousted by the Maoists in 1949. Given the ideological predilections, Chairman Mao was both suspicious and disdainful of the Indian leadership and its policies. Domestically, the Great Leap Forward launched by Mao in 1958 was floundering within a year, leading to murmurs of criticism. At the annual summer retreat in Beidahe, Liu Shiaoqi led the charge, urging Mao to end his initiative. Relations with the Soviet Union had come under strain as Khrushchev found Mao's rhetoric of "permanent revolution" reckless.¹¹⁷ Granting asylum to the Dalai Lama escaping from Tibet heightened Mao's suspicions about India's plans regarding the region. China's aggression on the border, launched on October 20, 1962, was in the middle of the Cuban Missile Crisis and ensured that both the U.S. and the Soviet leaderships were preoccupied.

With a complete rupture of its ties with the Soviet Union in 1969, China began to recalibrate its foreign policy. Henry Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing in mid-1971, facilitated by Pakistan, led to the process of normalizing ties. Mao's death provoked a long power struggle, with Deng Xiaoping emerging as the leader only at the end of the decade.

In South Asia, the breakup of Pakistan's and India's PNE made Pakistan an attractive partner for China. The 1980s provided an opening. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 led Pakistan to emerge as a frontline state in containing Communism, and the CIA found the ISI (Pakistan's intelligence service) a willing partner. As Pakistan pursued its clandestine nuclear program with active assistance from China, the United States found it politically expedient to turn a blind eye. In 1989, a weakened Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan, and the following year, nuclear proliferation-related sanctions were imposed on Pakistan. Gradually, China had become Pakistan's most important strategic and defense partner.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, the United States emerged as the sole superpower. China found it expedient to join the non-proliferation regime as a responsible global actor. It signed on to the NPT and became an NSG member. Faced with a severe financial crisis, the Indian economy initiated a reform process in 1991. Both China and India needed a peaceful environment to pursue economic development, and this provided the backdrop for the thaw in relations.

Initially, China's low-key reaction to India's nuclear tests on May 11, 1998, expressed concern and noted that it went against the international norm.¹¹⁸ In 1996, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) had been concluded, and China was among the original signatories. India had participated in the CTBT negotiations but quit because it only prohibited nuclear explosive testing, thereby permitting countries that had data accumulated over dozens of tests to continue with zero-yield lab testing.

Two days later, when the United States leaked Prime Minister Vajpayee's letter addressed to President Bill Clinton, wherein a China threat was mentioned along with its proliferation to Pakistan,¹¹⁹ China dramatically changed its position. It described these claims as "totally unreasonable" and called India's decision "immoral and irresponsible."¹²⁰ It talked of the longstanding Indian desire for hegemony in South Asia and blamed India for the damage done to the global nuclear regime brought about by the NPT and the CTBT. As the U.N. Security Council president, it coordinated a strong condemnatory resolution (Resolution 1172) urging both India and Pakistan to reverse their decisions by joining the NPT and the CTBT.

Following intense discussions with the United States, U.S.-India relations began to move in a positive direction. After the waiver by the NSG in 2008, where the United States played a major supportive role, India concluded civil nuclear cooperation agreements with over a dozen countries, including with NPT states—France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as with Australia, Canada, Japan, Kazakhstan, Namibia, and South Korea.

China, however, continues to maintain that because India is not a nuclear-weapon state under the NPT, any exception for India must also cover Pakistan and has therefore blocked India's NSG membership even though India adheres to the NSG guidelines and is a member of other export control regimes like the Australia Group, the Missile Technology Control Regime, and the Wassenaar Arrangement, unlike China.

With the United States finding itself embroiled in unending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the West facing a financial crisis, China began to review and readjust its foreign policy. The first signs of hardening became visible in the South China Sea with the issue of new maps, accompanied by large-scale dredging and land reclamation on the atolls. Hu Jintao had voiced China's need to overcome the Malacca Straits dilemma. Together with land reclamation, China began to expand its naval presence in the Indian Ocean. A "logistics support facility" was acquired in Djibouti.¹²¹ Since Xi Jinping took over in 2012, Chinese assertiveness has increased manifold.

China may still be talking about a multipolar world, but its vision for Asia demands that China have its "rightful" place.¹²² Xi has moved from Deng's advice to "bide your time, observe calmly, and maintain a low profile" to "display your capabilities and assume your rightful responsibilities."¹²³ A series of global initiatives have been taking shape. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) emerged in 2001 as a successor to the Shanghai Five, a grouping of central Asian states bordering China and Russia, and has become more active in the last decade. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) now spans 140 countries, with a Digital Silk Road as a complement. A Global Development Initiative and a Global Security Initiative have been launched. The SCO has launched the New Development Bank (NDB), while China has launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan further sharpened China's nationalism.

China sees the emergence of the Quad and AUKUS as U.S.-led containment measures. India objected to the BRI taking up projects in Pakistan in the disputed territory of Kashmir and has also highlighted the predatory financing that often accompanies the economically unviable projects. The growing Chinese footprint in Eurasia and the Indian Ocean provides the geopolitical backdrop to the recent clashes.

Taking a long view, it is clear that when Rajiv Gandhi and Deng Xiaoping initiated the policy shift in 1988, there were three underlying assumptions: first, that normalization of relations should be undertaken by insulating it from the boundary dispute; second, that peace and tranquility along the LAC region were essential pending settlement; and third, that the final resolution would be fair and mutually acceptable and an acknowledgement of the role of the two countries in global peace and progress. However, the underlying political realities changed dramatically in the following three decades, and this change contributed to the emergence of a new way of Chinese thinking; India was slow in recognizing the new assertive China and appeared content to seek reassurance in policy continuity. The following table makes this clear.

Table 1: Economic, Trade, and Military Spending Statistics of China and India, 1988–2018

Year	Nominal GDP (in \$ billion/trillion)	Per capita GDP in PPP terms (in \$)	Defense Expenditure (in 2018 constant \$)	Bilateral trade and India's trade balance (in \$)
1988	Ch 312 bill. Ind 297 bill.	Ch 855 Ind 1,000	Ch 20 bill. Ind 19 bill.	Insignificant border barter trade
1998	Ch 1.03 trill. Ind 421 bill.	Ch 2,451 Ind 1,853	Ch 32.6 bill. Ind 24 bill.	1.5 bill., with Indian deficit at 660 million
2008	Ch 4.6 trill. Ind 1.2 trill.	Ch 7,574 Ind: 3,651	Ch 113 bill. Ind 43.7 bill.	41.7 bill., with Indian deficit at \$21.5 bill.
2018	Ch 13.9 trill. Ind 2.7 trill.	Ch 15,390 Ind 6,580	Ch 253.5 bill. Ind 66.2 bill.	106.8 bill., with Indian deficit at \$74.3 bill. ¹²⁴

The growing mismatch in capabilities undermined the basis of the 1988 policy. While India's economic standing improved vis-à-vis most countries, relative to China, its position had worsened. In China's eyes, its comprehensive national power had risen to claim pole position in Asia and later on the global stage.

THE DOKLAM BORDER CONFLICT OF 2017

The standoff in Doklam in the summer of 2017, though a continuation of the increasing incursions and standoffs, was qualitatively different. It lasted longer (73 days); the incident occurred on territory that is disputed between Bhutan and China and lies in the Chumbi Valley at the trijunction of Bhutan, China, and India; and Chinese commentary, in media and official statements, was greater and shriller. Eventually, the matter was resolved by restoring the status quo ante, with both Chinese and Indian troops vacating the site of the standoff. But no resolution was attempted, ambiguity was maintained, and loose ends remained.

The calendar played out favorably for India—the ninth BRICS summit (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) was being hosted in Xiamen by Xi Jinping on September 3–5, and the 19th National Congress of the CCP was scheduled for October 18, where Xi Jinping was to be reappointed for his second term.

Bhutan and China share a 470-kilometer boundary that has not been demarcated. Talks began in 1984, and in 25 rounds, differences had been narrowed down to two areas: the Doklam plateau (89 square kilometers) in western Bhutan and an area in the north in the Pasamlung and Jakarlung Valleys (180 square kilometers). China was willing to relinquish its claims in the north, but Bhutan had rejected the swap. Such a swap would have moved the trijunction from Batang La further south toward the Zompelri ridgeline. Strategically, it would permit Chinese

forces to observe the narrow Siliguri Corridor, also known as the "Chicken's Neck," that connects the Indian landmass with its northeastern states. The 14,000-foot-high-altitude plateau does not host permanent villages, but cattle herders camp there during the summer months with their livestock.



Figure 4: Bhutan-China border

In early June, Chinese soldiers seeking to build a road through the plateau bulldozed an old Indian army bunker. The crisis was sparked on June 16 when a Royal Bhutan Army patrol intercepted the Chinese construction party and alerted the Indian authorities to ensure a "coordinated response."¹²⁵ Indian troops were rapidly deployed on the plateau, creating a standoff. Both sides sought to deal with it quietly, but after 10 days, China decided to go public and declared the closure of Nathu La on the Sikkim-Tibet border, a path used by pilgrims. Thereafter, almost daily, the *Global Times* carried a piece on the crisis, uncharacteristically loud and strident in tone.¹²⁶

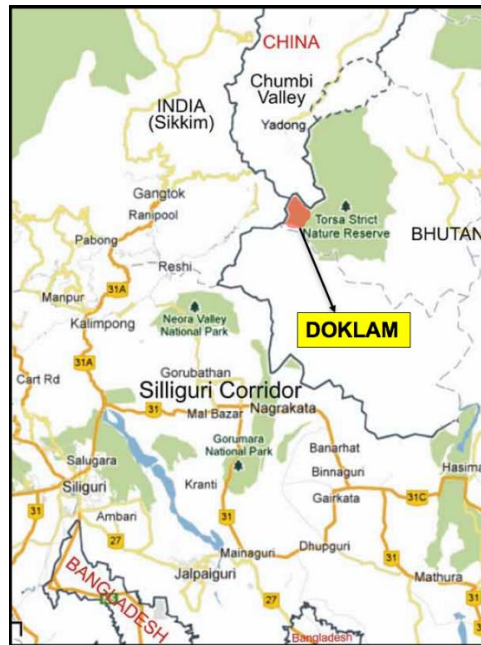


Figure 5: Doklam Trijunction

Beijing was incensed that India had intervened in what it considered a bilateral issue with Bhutan and miffed to discover that its attempt to probe Bhutan-India relations had misfired. It accused India of being “irresponsible” and “disrespecting Bhutan’s sovereignty.”¹²⁷ India pointed out that, under the 2012 agreement, trijunction points were to be “finalized in consultation between China, India, and the third country.”¹²⁸ On August 2, China put out a 15-page statement, demanding “immediate and unconditional withdrawal” and blaming India for escalating by bringing in “over 400 people” in an intrusion into “the Chinese territory.” It emphasized the “resolve of the Chinese government and people to defend China’s territorial sovereignty” and cautioned India against such trespassing activity, demanding that India “conduct a thorough investigation into the illegal trespass.”¹²⁹

Bhutan and India have enjoyed close and friendly ties. Both the 1949 Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship and its updated 2007 Treaty of Peace and Friendship reflect the depth of the relationship. Bhutan hosts three resident embassies—India, Bangladesh, and Kuwait—and has resident ambassadors in six countries and the United Nations, which it joined in 1971. So far, it has rejected Chinese suggestions for opening a resident embassy on the grounds that it has followed a uniform policy toward all members of the U.N. Security Council.

The crisis was resolved barely a week before the BRICS summit in Xiamen. On August 28, a coordinated disengagement was announced. China stated that India had pulled back its troops and equipment to its side of the border. Since India had not objected to the Chinese patrols coming to Doklam, but instead to the construction of the road as a change of the status quo forbidden under the 2012 agreement, this distinction provided a face-saving option for China. The statement that China would “continue to exercise its sovereignty and uphold its territorial integrity in accordance with historical convention” made no mention of the road.¹³⁰

Throughout, Bhutan demonstrated consistent support for India. Doklam is not of major strategic value to Bhutan, but by protesting the road building, it enabled India to justify its intervention by invoking the 2012 agreement. Most Indian commentators were quick to declare it a diplomatic victory for India and praise the Modi government for standing firm. Some foreign commentators were more cautious. Rory Medcalf contrasted the Indian withdrawal with the obfuscated language by China.¹³¹ M. Taylor Fravel warned that India may have scored a tactical win, but China had retained the strategic upper hand.¹³² Subsequent developments have revealed that claims of an Indian victory were indeed premature. By the end of 2017, satellite imagery showed that while China had left the road project unfinished, it had constructed new infrastructure, including helipads, munition storage

sites, and a radar station, and laid fiber-optic cables for communication. In short, the stage was set for a permanent presence in north Doklam. Since then, there are reports of a Chinese village named Pangda coming up on the west bank of the Mo River, and there is a road proceeding south from the village.¹³³ The Modi government has chosen to maintain complete silence on this issue despite some media commentary, indicating that it realizes it has been outmaneuvered.

China's presence will ensure that the Bhutanese herders no longer have free access to the grazing grounds. It is possible that this realization led Bhutanese foreign minister Tandi Dorji to visit China in October 2023 for the 25th round of boundary talks that had been suspended since 2017. A Cooperation Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Kingdom of Bhutan on the Responsibilities and Functions of the Joint Technical Team (JTT) on the Delimitation and Demarcation of the China-Bhutan Boundary was signed, signifying that forward movement had taken place. However, the details of the compromise reached on the Doklam plateau are not known.

Though the level of rhetoric was significantly higher on the Chinese side, there was no direct reference linking the nuclear dimension in either official statements or in Chinese or Indian media commentaries.

THE GALWAN BORDER CONFLICT OF 2020–21

The escalation at Galwan in Aksai Chin on June 15, 2020, led to the first deaths on the LAC in 45 years. Ten Indian soldiers taken into custody were returned 48 hours later, even as tensions escalated. The crisis covered multiple friction points at the LAC in the eastern sector, from Depsang (near Daulat Beg Oldie) in the north to Chumar/Demchok in the south. At its peak, there were more than 100,000 soldiers facing each other on the icy slopes, backed by artillery and mechanized forces. Figure 6 below, together with Figure 1 on page 28, indicates that the 2020 incursion is across the entire LAC in the western sector.

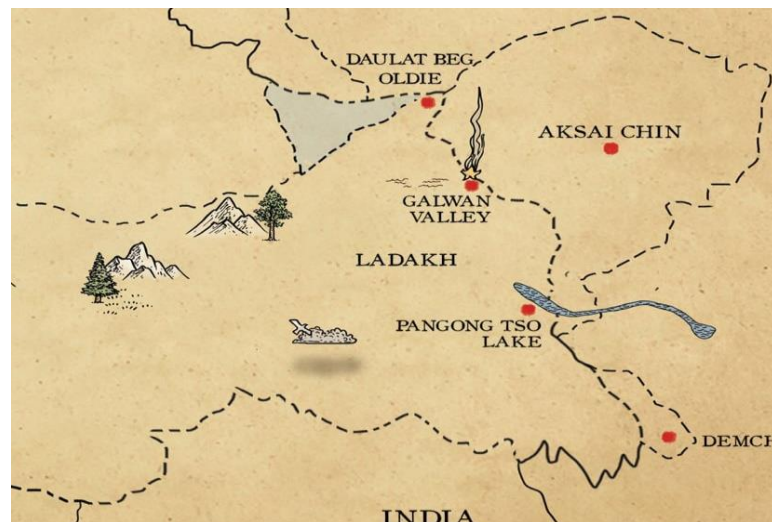


Figure 6: China-India 2020 border clash in western sector

Three years later, disengagement has taken place at four of the six friction points (Depsang and Chumar are pending, with China describing these as “legacy” issues), though there has not been any de-escalation. Thirteen rounds of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs and 20 rounds of military commander-level talks have taken place, as well as talks at the ministerial level, and finally, on August 23, 2023, between Modi and Xi on the sidelines of the BRICS summit in Johannesburg.

The readout of the talks between the two leaders was different. According to the Chinese statement, Xi said “the two sides should bear in mind the overall interest of their bilateral relations and handle properly the border issue

so as to jointly safeguard peace and tranquility in the border region.”¹³⁴ The Indian foreign secretary said that “[Modi] highlighted India’s concerns on the unresolved issues along the LAC” and “underlined that the maintenance of peace and tranquility in the border areas and observing and respecting the LAC are essential for normalization.”¹³⁵ China’s focus is on other aspects of the relationship now that disengagement has taken place, while India’s emphasis is on de-escalation, though Modi did not demand a return to status quo ante—a demand that has been voiced at the ministerial level repeatedly. The process of informal summits initiated in 2018 appears to have run its course. For China, the objective of the exercise was to lower the diplomatic temperature, but it provided no “strategic guidance to the militaries,” as the Indian statement after the 2018 Wuhan meeting claimed.¹³⁶

Despite the standoff, nuclear rhetoric is missing in the discourse. There are two reasons for this: the nature of threat perceptions and symmetrical doctrinal approaches. This is consistent with past practice, but in the future, both are open to being called into question. The former is because of changing geopolitics, and the latter is on account of growing nuclear capabilities, particularly China’s rapid nuclear expansion and modernization.

Neither China nor India perceives the other as an existential threat. The territories in dispute are marginal, in the east for China and in the west for India. This realization is apparent in the 2005 agreement that revives the swap proposition that has periodically emerged, in one form or another, since the 1960s.¹³⁷ That it has not fructified is because of domestic or geopolitical factors casting a shadow. But the current shadow appears to be darker because the U.S.-China rivalry appears to be emerging as the fault line in the 21st century. In China’s perception of its role in Asia, it sees India not as a peer rival but as the only regional country with the size, peninsular geography, and military capability that can be an obstacle to its goal.

So far, both countries have had similar doctrinal approaches toward nuclear weapons. Both have sought a credible minimum deterrent, attributed a limited role to nuclear weapons,¹³⁸ and adopted a no-first-use policy. Nuclear forces were not put on alert in 2020, and nuclear rhetoric was not employed.¹³⁹ China’s rapid modernization can, however, change the situation.

The key emerging difference in threat perceptions is that for India, China remains the primary long-term strategic threat, and consequently, its nuclear policy and capabilities merit serious attention, but for Chinese security planners, India has remained a minor security issue. Traditionally, in terms of priority, it comes after the United States, Russia, and Japan.¹⁴⁰ Though it has begun to receive more attention than in the past, often this is due to India’s Quad membership, the growing acceptance of the term Indo-Pacific, and a closer defense relationship with the United States. The Chinese strategic community has tended to underestimate China’s role in shaping Indian threat perceptions. This also helps in downplaying the risk of nuclear escalation in any conventional conflict, an approach that finds favor in both Delhi and Beijing.

In the past, China’s moves to counter India relied on bolstering Pakistan. In addition to the conventional defense ties, it has played a major role in building Pakistan’s missile and nuclear capabilities.¹⁴¹ Pakistan’s military intelligence has also been cooperative in tracking East Turkestan Islamic Movement Uighurs transiting between Xinjiang and Afghanistan. During the last decade, China has stepped up its engagement by making Pakistan the largest recipient of its BRI investment (approximately \$65 billion), though this may increase Pakistan’s economic woes if it leads to unsustainable indebtedness, as has happened with some countries. However, as India acquires and develops longer-range missiles and its nuclear ballistic missile submarine program moves forward, the two countries may be reaching a crossroads in their nuclear relations.

India’s conventional military advantage in geographical terms on account of faster supply chains is quickly eroding, with major Chinese infrastructure being built in Tibet, a much faster pace of conventional modernization, and the adoption of new disruptive technologies. Until the end of the 20th century, India did nothing to upgrade the road infrastructure in the border areas, guided by the thinking that this would slow down any intrusive Chinese advances, giving India additional time for deploying reinforcements brought up from the interior. This was called into question, and in 2006, India authorized the upgrade and construction of 73 new border roads and

the activation of advanced landing grounds, some of which had been in use during World War II but never used since. However, progress on this has been slow. Nevertheless, with the Indian troop presence having been enhanced by introducing two additional mountain divisions along the LAC, Indian patrolling in the area has intensified. As a result, more Chinese incursions have been detected, and standoffs have become more frequent. China holds Indian infrastructure development responsible for altering the status quo, ignoring that it has had a decade-plus head start over India in this exercise.

However, the higher level of Indian deployments has led to more armor and artillery units. The activation of the advanced landing grounds has meant that the runways closer to the LAC have seen more air force activity, in terms of providing logistics and surveillance support. It has not had any impact on the nuclear posture, though. As long as India's nuclear expansion plans do not shift toward deploying tactical nuclear weapons, neither side will have incentives for nuclear use, and nuclear deterrence will remain in play. However, this also means that China does not see any need to engage in a nuclear dialogue with India.¹⁴²

There is one conundrum that China has boxed itself into. Publicly, China maintains that India cannot be a nuclear-weapon state (under the NPT) and therefore has been unwilling to engage with India on this issue lest it confer some legitimacy or recognition to India's position. Evidently, this is guided by its long-standing policy of boxing India into the South Asian framework and equating it with Pakistan. It is why China blocked India's membership in the NSG, claiming that the group had to adopt a policy toward admitting non-NPT members. But such an approach can serve China's purpose only as long as deterrence remains stable.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SINO-INDIA RELATIONS

Trends in both countries suggest that prospects for a more overt nuclear deterrence relationship may be increasing in view of the changing geopolitical equations in the region and the development and deployment of disruptive and dual-use technologies like surveillance platforms, drones, and hypersonics. Both India and China are led by strong leaders who are adept at exploiting nationalist sentiment.

During the early 2000s, China and India shared certain common interests as large developing countries, which led them to cooperate in global fora. The two also came together in organizations like the BRICS, the SCO, the NDB, and the AIIB, none of which have any Western participation. However, China's pushing through projects under the BRI in Pakistan in the disputed territory of Kashmir, placing a hold repeatedly in the U.N. Security Council on India's attempts to get certain Pakistani militant groups designated as terrorists, and blocking India's membership in the NSG reflect a growing and persistent lack of sensitivity to India's core concerns.

Even though India and China still do not see each other as existential threats, the likelihood of a limited, short, but high-intensity conflict has grown, and face-to-face deployments with constant probing could catalyze escalation pressures. The deployment or use of dual-capable missiles against air bases close to the border areas or increasing standoffs in the Indian Ocean region as both countries increase subsurface patrols create friction points that run the risk of compressed timelines.

China does not see India as an ally of the United States in the sense that it sees Japan or South Korea, but if the two enhance cooperation in the missile defense field, Chinese perceptions could begin to change. China has long relied on ensuring a strategic balance in South Asia by propping up Pakistan. This may have been adequate as long as China-India relations were stable and both countries visualized a shared vision of an Asian 21st century. That paradigm is no more.

Since China-India nuclear issues have never manifested in any rhetoric, Chinese analysts have dismissed India's nuclear program as a quest for global prestige, and in any event, Indian capabilities are still far inferior to China's. China needs to overcome its hesitation to accept a mutual deterrence relationship with India and engage in a dialogue. To prepare the ground for a proper strategic dialogue that covers the nuclear dimension, a beginning can be made by convening at a track-two level where participants could engage more freely. Eventually, this

should lead to a more formal dialogue and military-to-military communication links, both at the headquarter- and theater-level.

- ¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022* (Washington, D.C., November 2022), ix, 94. For more background on these developments, see Eric Heginbotham et al., *China's Evolving Nuclear Deterrent: Major Drivers and Issues for the United States* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017).
- ² Yu Jixun, ed., 《第二炮兵战役学》 [Science of Second Artillery] (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 2004). See also Michael S. Chase and Andrew S. Erickson, "The Conventional Missile Capabilities of China's Second Artillery Force: Cornerstone of Deterrence and Warfighting," *Asian Security* 8, no. 2 (2012): 115–37; and Alastair Iain Johnston, "China's New 'Old Thinking': The Concept of Limited Deterrence," *International Security* 20, no. 3 (1995): 5–42.
- ³ Brad Roberts, "Strategic Deterrence Beyond Taiwan," in Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell, ed. *Beyond the Strait: PLA Missions Other Than Taiwan* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2009), 169. See also Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Dangerous Confidence? Chinese Views on Nuclear Escalation," *International Security* 44, no. 2 (2019); and Fiona S. Cunningham and M. Taylor Fravel, "Assuring Assured Retaliation: China's Nuclear Posture and U.S.-China Strategic Stability," *International Security* 40, no. 2 (2015).
- ⁴ FY22–FY26 Strategic Trends Division Broad Agency Announcement (BAA), Notice ID HDTRA1-22-S-0004, System for Award Management, <https://sam.gov/opp/a48a638051f741228d61689cadd02c86/view>.
- ⁵ Allen Whiting's account of the Sino-Indian conflict of 1969, for example, remains one of the most authoritative books on China's decision-making process, to include its calculus of the use of nuclear weapons. See Allen Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975).
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