India and China: A Managed Nuclear Rivalry?

Between June and August of 2017, a major military confrontation occurred between Indian and Chinese troops at Doklam, an area close to the Sino-Indian border disputed by Bhutan and China. A Chinese attempt to build a road in Doklam led to a quick deployment of Indian forces and a face-off that lasted until late August, when both sides agreed to disengage. The confrontation marked a high point in the friction between India and China, two of the world’s nine known nuclear states, that had been rising for well over a decade. Similar frictions raising the specter of a holocaust have occurred periodically between nuclear-armed states since the early Cold War days, some involving significant armed clashes, notably between China and the Soviet Union in 1969 and between India and Pakistan in 1999.

Tensions subsided further in late April 2018 when Chinese president Xi Jinping and Indian prime minister Narendra Modi met informally at Wuhan in China. At the ten-hour meeting, the two sides agreed to improve communications and strengthen numerous confidence-building measures (CBMs) already in place. Since then, India and China have held a number of ministerial meetings, restarting a delayed maritime dialogue in July 2018 and resuming their joint military counter-terrorism exercises after a two-year gap. In April 2019, the Indian Navy took part in an international fleet review hosted by the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). The new warmth between China and India appears to confirm the judgment of many analysts that the competition has been well managed by a process of regular political engagement between the two nuclear powers.

Dr. Rajesh Basrur is a visiting professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and a research associate in the Contemporary South Asian Studies Programme (CSASP) at the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford. He can be contacted at israjesh@ntu.edu.sg.
But there is another side to the story. The underlying sources of tension between the two countries remain unaddressed, and new problems are looming. A useful framework for understanding the strategic relationship is that of “comparative nuclear rivalries,” a surprisingly under-explored topic considering the enormous effort expended on the study of inter-state rivalries. The India-China confrontation corresponds closely to a pattern of strategic behavior typical of five sets of nuclear-armed rivals: the United States and the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union and China after 1964, the United States and China during the Cold War and again with the post-Cold War resurgence of US-China tensions, the United States and North Korea since Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions became evident in the 1990s, and India and Pakistan since both went nuclear covertly in the 1980s.

The significance of these nuclear rivalries is that tensions are always present and the risk of catastrophe is underscored by the presence of nuclear weapons. Despite mitigating factors, seemingly well-managed rivalries have the potential to deteriorate and run serious risks of nuclear escalation, particularly soon after the nuclear rivalry has been established. This can happen when there is a leadership change in either country, domestic political pressure, or instabilities between the two militaries arising from strategic interaction, either on land or sea.

Although I had previously concluded in 2013 that it was unlikely that India and China were entering a nuclear rivalry, I believe the situation has changed as exemplified by Doklam. India and China have now entered into such a nuclear rivalry.8

Characteristics of Historical Nuclear Rivalries

Historically, strategic rivalries between nuclear states share five main characteristics. First, the contestants invariably have a history of tension dating back to the period prior to the acquisition of nuclear weapons by both. Second, mutual insecurity, heightened by the advent of nuclear weapons, produces intensified competitive politics in the form of arms racing. Third, nuclear rivals try to build alliances or similar arrangements to augment their strategic strength. Fourth, contests over territory—often arising from conflicting sovereignty claims or from competition over spheres of influence, markets, and the establishment of ideologically shaped political structures—are central to such relationships. And fifth, the ratcheting up of tensions, combined with the constraints imposed
by nuclear weapons, leads to various forms of confrontation short of war and the recurrence of periodic crises between the contestants. In this section, I describe these characteristics before assessing whether the India-China relationship exhibits this same pattern.

**Pre-Nuclear Tensions**

The onset of a nuclear rivalry is not sudden, but it always carries a history of friction and sometimes armed conflict dating back to pre-nuclear times (i.e., before both acquired nuclear weapons). The roots of the Cold War, usually viewed as a post-World War II phenomenon, go back a long way to the nineteenth century, when the United States and the Russian Empire expanded into the Pacific—the former westward, the latter eastward. India and Pakistan, similarly, had a history of mutual antagonism, wars, and crises before their relationship became a nuclear rivalry. Likewise, antagonisms in the other nuclear dyads date back to their pre-nuclear pasts.

**Heightened Threat and Arms Buildup**

Material tensions, or heightened threat perceptions and arms buildups, historically characterize nuclear rivalries. The Cold War was marked by intensified tension between the United States and the Soviet Union after the latter acquired nuclear weapons in 1949. Tensions similarly arose between the United States and China in the mid-1960s and between the United States and North Korea around the time when the latter crossed the nuclear threshold covertly in the mid-1990s and overtly in the mid-2000s. India and Pakistan have engaged in sustained arms racing to strengthen their respective nuclear capabilities, particularly after 1998.

**Competitive Alliance Building**

Historically, strategic rivals have tried to strengthen themselves by forming alliances. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union built alliance systems—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact—to confront each other militarily. The American alliance system has served to try to contain other adversaries as well: China and North Korea. Pakistan joined the US-led Cold War alliance system (the Southeast Asia Treaty organization and the Central Treaty Organization) with similar intent vis-à-vis India. India did not respond likewise because it did not view Pakistan as an existential threat (but did seek help from the Soviet Union to enhance its military capabilities against China).

**Persistent Tension over Territory**

In one form or another, nuclear rivalries have engaged in contests over territorial space. More often than not, this has involved competition to establish
ideologically based influence. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union faced off over control of territory around the world, notably in Europe and East Asia. Similar contests pitted the United States against China in Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Today, the United States and South Korea are ranged against North Korea for control of the Korean peninsula, while Taiwan remains at the center of US-China tensions. In other instances, direct tussles over historical and/or political claims to sovereignty over specific territories have underscored strategic tensions between nuclear powers. Taiwan is also a contested political entity, challenging China’s notions of its proper borders. China and the Soviet Union almost went to war in 1969 over their disputed riverine border, and India and Pakistan have lurched from crisis to crisis over Kashmir.

Crisis Proneness
Nuclear rivalries tend to be particularly susceptible to destabilization during their early stages. The US-Soviet relationship underwent a series of crises during the late 1940s (around the time the Soviet Union first tested its bomb) and was severely tested in Berlin in 1961 and Cuba in 1962. There were similar clashes in other nuclear dyads: the US-China confrontation in Vietnam involved aerial dogfights and anti-aircraft firing on American planes by Chinese gunners, Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969 saw substantial fighting and massive military mobilization by both sides, and India-Pakistan confrontations involved intense but controlled fighting in the Kargil conflict (1999) and a near war in the 2001–02 crisis. The United States seriously considered military action against North Korea both before and after its 2006 nuclear test.

As Doklam signified, China and India now share these five characteristics of nuclear rivalries.

The Onset of a Nuclear Rivalry between China and India
As the conflict in Doklam signified, China and India now share these five characteristics of nuclear rivalries.

Pre-Nuclear Tensions
In the India-China instance, the conflict goes back to their differences over the border, which became prominent in the late 1950s. The two countries went to war in 1962, and small-scale fighting broke out again in September-October 1967. Technically, India’s lone 1974 test made it a nuclear-capable power, but
it made no attempt to build an arsenal at the time, so a nuclear rivalry did not, strictly speaking, come to exist until much later. Armed combat has not occurred between the two countries since 1967, but periodic frictions have, and a major border confrontation stretched to nearly a year in 1986–87.14

The turning point was the end of the Cold War, which left India without the support of a former source for balancing China: the Soviet Union. Simultaneous pressure from both the United States and China to roll back its covert nuclear program led India to burst out of the nuclear closet with its 1998 tests. This produced two major outcomes: first, the India-China military equation became nuclearized, generating a new source of tension between them; and second, Washington—after a brief negative reaction to the tests—moved rapidly to build strategic links with India, which in turn sharpened Chinese threat perceptions. India’s formal crossing of the nuclear threshold, in short, engendered the onset of nuclear rivalry in India-China relations.

**Heightened Threat and Arms Buildup**

The new dynamic meant that the essential features of a nuclear rivalry came into being, though in a complex form. Whereas the Cold War was primarily a bilateral conflict (the other members of the two alliances were basically minor players), the emerging India-China “cold war” involves a more complex set of nuclear-strategic relationships. For India, the threat is dual: the immediate threat for war for India comes from Pakistan, which receives assistance (nuclear and non-nuclear) from China,15 and China itself has nuclear weapons that directly target India. China views its chief nuclear threat as emanating from the United States, but— notwithstanding its tendency to downplay the threat from India—Beijing has been concerned about India’s rising capabilities, particularly after the successful testing of the China-specific Agni-II medium-range missile in 1999 and the subsequent development of more advanced missiles.16

In contrast to the bilateral arms racing that characterized the Cold War, there is today an arms competition “chain” in which Beijing responds to Washington and, in turn, New Delhi to Beijing (and then Islamabad to New Delhi).17 China’s military modernization has proceeded apace, with notable gains in high-technology weaponry that are viewed with concern in the United States.18 This modernization has galvanized India to augment its conventional and nuclear capabilities vis-à-vis China.19 Indian efforts to boost military capacity include building a mountain-strike corps, deploying Sukhoi-30s—India’s most advanced combat aircraft—close to the China border, and accelerating development of military infrastructure in the border region. On the nuclear side, India has been developing longer-range missiles, nuclear-powered and -armed submarines, and multiple warhead missiles. In March 2019, India conducted a successful Anti-Satellite (ASAT) weapon test.
Competitive Alliance Building

Today, India and China are similarly engaged in strategic competition, though its geometry is rather more complex as no new alliance system has emerged. Responding to China’s military and economic rise, India and the United States have reached out to each other, building a relationship that incorporates strategic consultation, military collaboration, and arms transfers. Though India has not entered into a military alliance with the United States, China feels threatened, which has intensified tension between the two Asian powers. In addition, the United States and India have established a triangular linkage with Japan—notably through major naval exercises—with the prospect of further expansion into a four-nation coalition, the so-called “Quad,” which would include Australia.

At the same time, China has embarked on large-scale economic investment in India’s immediate neighborhood, emerging as a major player in the virtual circle from Pakistan to Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Nepal. It has also transferred substantial quantities of weapons to Pakistan and Bangladesh. From 2009 to 2018, Pakistan imported US$6.17 billion worth of arms (58.42 percent of its total arms imports) from China, while Bangladesh obtained US$1.91 billion worth (71.71 percent of its total) from China. India has refused to participate in China’s mega-investment project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), because it encompasses the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which traverses territory held by Pakistan and claimed by New Delhi. Instead, it has attempted its own investments, albeit on a more modest scale and in tandem with partners, notably Japan.

In the maritime domain, India-China competition has intensified as the PLAN has vigorously pursued blue water capability and established a naval presence in the Indian Ocean. India is alarmed by Beijing’s rapidly growing influence in the region, most visibly through the construction of ports in Hambantota (Sri Lanka) and Gwadar (Pakistan), its acquisition of a military base in Djibouti, and the active presence of its naval vessels in the region. New Delhi has responded with its own naval modernization, acquiring a range of conventional capabilities and building nuclear-powered and -armed submarines. In addition, it has forged strategic linkages in China’s backyard through cooperative security and economic agreements, notably with Singapore and Vietnam.

In tune with the new US strategic conception of the “Indo-Pacific,” India has also expanded its horizons into the Western Pacific, carrying out regular military exercises with the United States and Japan. It has also established a growing presence in the Middle East, participating in the construction of Chabahar port in Iran and signing agreements that give it access to port facilities in Oman (2018) as well as to American and French naval bases in the Indian Ocean (in 2016 and 2018, respectively). Currently, India is also seeking access to the
French naval base in Djibouti. India and China have competed vigorously for influence in the Maldives Republic, which has been embroiled in domestic turmoil and is now leaning toward India. The contest has stretched all the way to Africa with the rivals competing for oil resources and investment markets there.

India and Japan have launched the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, committing US$10 billion and US$20 billion, respectively. In April 2019, India and Oman together signed a US$3.85 billion deal to build an oil refinery in Sri Lanka, the country’s largest single foreign direct investment (FDI) pledge ever. In May 2019, it was reported that India and Japan had teamed up to help Sri Lanka expand its largest port in Colombo.

**Persistent Tension over Territory**

The India-China border dispute remains intense since Doklam has produced constant friction and localized confrontation from time to time. The chief source of tension is the lack of agreement between the two sides on defining the Line of Actual Control (LAC), which separates their armies. The poorly defined dividing line invites periodic brinkmanship and military confrontations.

India has called repeatedly for talks to define the LAC, but China has demurred, preferring to advocate a “code of conduct” for the military forces of the two sides. One concern the Chinese appear to harbor is that an agreement on the LAC might prejudice border negotiations. However, Indian prime minister Narendra Modi’s public assurance in 2017 that it would not was met with continued stonewalling on the issue. As a result, the LAC remains a point of contention, and both sides have been reinforcing their ground and air forces as well as infrastructure along its approximately 4,000 kilometer length.

**Crisis Proneness**

Given the relatively recent nuclearization of the India-China rivalry, the growing tension and repeated confrontations culminating in the Doklam crisis are unsurprising. Apart from the prolonged confrontation at Sumdorong Chu in 1986–87, there have been regular frictions along the border in more recent years. One study counted thirty incidents during the 2003–14 period, with the number doubling every three years, from two in 2003–05 to sixteen in 2012–14. Three major incidents were the destruction of Indian Army bunkers by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in 2007, a three-week confrontation at Daulat Beg Oldi in the Aksai Chin area in 2013, and a similar face-off at
Chumar in Ladakh in 2014. Notwithstanding the gap in available data after 2014, there is clearly a trend toward more frequent confrontations, so Doklam did not come as a surprise.

**Mitigating Factors**

Despite rising tensions, India and China have strong incentives to exercise strategic restraint. Contending nuclear powers are compelled by the threat of mutual destruction to cooperate. They do so in two ways: by exercising caution in order to avoid war and by engaging in negotiations that allow them to stand down and sometimes to institutionalize stability between them through confidence building and arms control. With respect to strategic stabilization efforts, the United States and the Soviet Union initiated a process of arms control negotiations following the Cuban Missile crisis. China and the Soviet Union engaged in talks and an understanding on their border after their 1969 clashes. Following the crises of 1999 and 2001–02, India and Pakistan launched a comprehensive dialogue that resulted in a distinctive (if short-lived) improvement in relations.

Similarly, the India-China relationship has seen regular political engagement on the border issue as well as border meetings between local military commanders and a series of CBMs. A Working Mechanism on Consultation and Coordination for India-China Border Affairs was established in 2012 and has met regularly, while political leaders have met periodically at a higher level, especially after the Doklam crisis. Modi and Xi conferred in China on the sidelines of a BRICS summit in September 2017, barely a month after Doklam; in December 2017; in March 2018 under the Working Mechanism; in April 2018 at the Wuhan Summit; and in February 2019 at the Russia-India-China (RIC) meeting in Wuzhen, China.

Unlike the other nuclear rivalries (though like the current US-China rivalry, notwithstanding the current trade war), the India-China relationship has strong economic incentives to build a stable relationship over time. Indian policymakers complain about the trade imbalance favoring China, but the benefits of bilateral trade outweigh its disadvantages since China has become India’s largest partner in trade in goods. Total trade, which stood at just US$188 million in 1992, touched US$69.48 billion in 2016. The BRI, which India has rejected, is a more complex issue. Its CPEC component is a security concern for India not only because it traverses territory
claimed by India in the portion of Kashmir held by Pakistan, but also because its emerging military dimensions encompass arms transfers and space cooperation, according to a 2018 *New York Times* report.\(^37\)

But even as it shuns the BRI, India welcomes large-scale Chinese investment.\(^38\) Although strategic tensions have grown, China’s rank as a source of FDI in India has displayed a rapidly rising trajectory: from 35th in 2011, to 28th in 2014, up to 17th in 2016.\(^39\) According to a 2018 *Forbes* report, China is well placed to become one of India’s top ten sources of FDI.\(^40\) The same report estimates Chinese FDI in India at US$2.0 billion in 2016, but according to another report, the actual level may be around five times official figures if we factor in smaller deals and deals originating from “Chinese-owned units with headquarters outside the mainland” such as firms in Hong Kong and Macau.\(^41\) The largest FDI flows into India expected in the near future are from China (42 percent), with the United States (24 percent) and the United Kingdom (11 percent) following well behind.\(^42\) India’s attractiveness for Chinese FDI is also likely the result of US-China tensions. Chinese FDI in the United States fell by 90 percent between 2016 and 2018 from US$46 billion to US$4.8 billion.\(^43\) Full-scale war has been rendered rationally obsolete not only because nuclear rivals are strategically interdependent owing to the threat of catastrophic damage in a nuclear exchange, but also because, in several cases, they are also economically interdependent.\(^44\)

It is evident, therefore, that there are strong incentives for India and China not to fight. But analysts cannot be sanguine about the stability of the relationship. There are significant reasons why nuclear rivals still raise concerns, not least because crises have a habit of occurring with unfailing regularity.

**Escalation Risks**

Nuclear powers may rationally wish to avoid war, but there is no guarantee that they will not lose control when tensions build. One reason is the “stability/instability paradox,” wherein the existence of strategic deterrence arising from the presence of nuclear weapons allows, and sometimes even encourages, conflict at lower levels.\(^45\) Originally developed to conceive of conventional conflict between nuclear-armed states, the paradox, in practice, applies to a range of conflicts short of war: marginal wars (as in the 1969 Sino-Soviet and 1999 Kashmir cases), support for proxies fighting an adversary, brinkmanship to demonstrate resolve or coerce an adversary, and occasional confrontations involving low-level armed violence.

Though India-China relations have been relatively stable, the risk of military escalation is ever present. The Doklam crisis was a classic case involving rising threat perceptions, growing tensions producing border incidents, and risks arising
from local initiatives by military officials in the border area. Recent conversations with Indian officials reveal an acute perception of continuing instability despite the apparent warmth between the two nations because the fundamentals of competition—antagonistic balancing policies and the territorial dispute—remain unchanged.\textsuperscript{46}

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\textbf{Domestic Political Interests}

Tensions between strategic rivals are particularly prone to spike because domestic pressures impel leaders to show resolve. Nikita Khrushchev tried to consolidate his internal position by installing missiles in Cuba, John F. Kennedy was determined to demonstrate his toughness to the American public as well as to Khrushchev when the missiles were discovered, Mao used the 1969 Sino-Soviet crisis to re-establish his leadership amidst the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, Ronald Reagan sought to “make America great again” by aiding anti-communist rebels in Afghanistan and Nicaragua, and three generations of Kims in North Korea have used nuclear weapons and crises to shore up their regimes.

For China’s leadership, nationalism has become a critical source of legitimacy at a time when its only other source of public support—economic growth—has come under pressure.\textsuperscript{47} Notably, two major India-China confrontations in 2013 and 2014 occurred precisely when major leadership meetings were scheduled in China—possibly as a signal to India, but likely as a demonstration of strength to the Chinese public.

Arguably, Chinese leaders have avoided an agreement on demarcating the LAC because keeping the nationalist pot simmering helps the regime secure the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Indian nationalism is no less strident, driven by the weakness of governments and by the exigencies of electoral politics. Modi’s proclivity for tough action under pressure has been on display through limited army and air force action against Pakistan in 2016 and 2019, respectively. Conceivably, domestic exigency may drive either country’s leadership to provoke tension and raise the specter of war in order to mobilize public support, a time-tested strategy.\textsuperscript{48}

In addition, there are other sources of risk pertaining to possible escalation arising from military interaction both on land and at sea.

\textbf{Escalation on Land}

Significant outbreaks of armed combat between nuclear rivals have only occurred twice on land borders: between China and the Soviet Union in 1969 and...
between India and Pakistan in 1999. But the risk of conflagration was substantial in other cases as well. As noted above, the undemarcated LAC is the focal point of confrontation between the Indian and Chinese militaries. Command and control may not be tight enough, and local commanders could initiate a crisis or actual combat. This happened during the Cuban missile crisis when a Soviet anti-aircraft battery opened fire and shot down a US Air Force surveillance aircraft. The U2 had been spotted over Cuba and was about to leave the area, and a decision had to be made on whether to open fire on it. The Soviet commander in Cuba was not contactable, so his deputy, Leonid Garbuz, and the deputy commander for Air Defenses, Stepan Grechko, made the decision to shoot the U2 down. The incident did not trigger war, but it came close to doing so.

On the India-China border, similar risks exist that could lead to war. Indian forces acted quickly at Doklam because local commanders had been given operational autonomy and acted independently to confront the Chinese. Given that there is little time to reflect in the midst of crisis situations, there is every possibility that similar local initiatives may, in the future, produce an action-reaction process that pits the two forces in combat. This conflict could then quickly spiral out of control.

The fact that armed combat has not broken out for more than half a century despite repeated incidents of border friction is not in itself reassuring. Military officers acknowledge that recent confrontations on the LAC have come uncomfortably close to the employment of arms. Reports of the use of physical force short of regular combat have appeared periodically, notably in June 2016, June 2017, and August 2017. An unverified but apparently authentic video of the last of these incidents shows Chinese and Indian troops engaged in pushing, kicking, fisticuffs, and throwing stones. In such circumstances, it is hard to be confident that the first shot will never be fired.

**Escalation at Sea**

The growing activity of Chinese and Indian naval forces in the Indian Ocean and the South and East China Seas carries significant risks. Red lines are less clear on the water, and tactics of shadowing and stalking are regularly employed by rival naval forces. Collisions involving both surface ships and submarines, including nuclear-armed submarines, occur from time to time. One study of submarine accidents over a 60-year period shows as many as five collisions. A recent report highlights a major collision (not listed in the just-cited study) between an American nuclear-armed submarine, the USS James Madison, and an unidentified Soviet submarine off Glasgow in 1974. The problem remains, particularly with respect to the crowded seas of East Asia: between January and August 2017, the US Navy was involved in three collisions (though all with
commercial vessels). The tension generated by naval accidents or near-accidents could have the same effects as skirmishes on land and carries the potential for sudden escalation.

As Sino-Indian tensions have grown, signs of rising friction at sea have been evident. As far back as 2009, Indian and Chinese naval ships were playing cat and mouse in the Western Indian Ocean, with Indian sources saying their naval helicopters “buzzed” a Chinese vessel and Chinese officials claiming similar action. Chinese ships have “shadowed” Indian exercises with Japan and the United States in the Western Pacific. And in February 2018, even as the Indian news media debated a possible intervention in the then crisis-ridden Maldives, China conducted a major naval exercise in the Eastern Indian Ocean, possibly as a signal indicating its stakes in that country. Given these conditions and the increasing border tension between India and China, a Doklam-like crisis at sea is very much in the cards.

As on land, confrontations at sea may slip out of control because of initiatives taken by local commanders based on their perceptions during a crisis. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, when American ships subjected Soviet submarines to intense pressures, including dropping practice depth charges to force them to come up, there was a high risk of war, including the near use of a nuclear weapon in two separate decisions. Soviet submarine commanders were unaware that the practice depth charges were in fact harmless and apparently concluded that war had broken out. One commander ordered the tube housing the nuclear torpedo in his vessel to be flooded in preparation for firing but eventually took the decision not to go ahead. Another commander, according to a shipmate, was on the verge of giving the order to fire a nuclear torpedo but was persuaded by the fleet commander, an additional senior official who happened to be on board, to change his mind. Tactical maneuvers during an India-China confrontation could well produce some variant of this, particularly in the fog of crisis.

To add another dimension arising from disruptive technological change, the risk of local initiative is exacerbated by the potential for cyber-attacks to interrupt communications to submarines or otherwise confuse or disable computer-related systems on ships. This is particularly troubling with respect to nuclear weapons. Though nuclear weapons are “air gapped” from the Internet, they are nevertheless subject to a range of threats from states as well as non-state actors. These include malware introduced into computer-related systems during the initial procurement process, subsequently when updates are installed, or during maintenance or refurbishing. The components affected could range from a
submarine’s nuclear reactor and weapons systems to a vessel’s water supplies. Communications to submarines could be jammed or otherwise compromised—there is evidence that this has already been attempted. Given the regularity with which supposedly well-protected systems are penetrated by hackers, there is no reason to believe this will never happen in the China-India context.

**Nuclear Risk**

The nuclear dimension of risk in India-China relations has not been considered worrisome by analysts, at least not in the way that has been true of the India-Pakistan relationship. First, the two states are not engaged in direct nuclear competition: China’s nuclear program is aimed primarily at deterring the United States. But this in itself is not reassuring. In some ways, the risk may be higher if one side, in this case China, is not paying attention. China has been reluctant to engage in serious negotiations with India on nuclear confidence building and hence may underestimate the gains from agreeing on greater transparency and better communications as components of nuclear risk reduction.

Second, China’s capabilities are said to be far ahead of India’s, particularly with respect to undersea nuclear capability. This difference implies that the nuclear competition between them is not a significant source of tension. The view reflects the widespread notion that some sort of balance of capabilities is the *sine qua non* of effective nuclear deterrence. But a review of the Cold War era shows us that nuclear balances are of little significance during major crises. In the Berlin and Cuban crises, the Soviet Union’s warheads were only 11.21 and 13.11 percent of US warheads, but the United States did not derive an advantage from the huge gap. The story is similar with even bigger gaps between the Soviet Union and China in 1969 (China’s warheads constituted 0.47 percent of those possessed by the Soviet Union) and the United States and China in the mid-1960s (0.18 percent). The “gap” between China and India is not, therefore, a stabilizing factor. Nor is the much-touted embrace of a No First Use (NFU) commitment by both governments; neither really believes the other anyway, which is understandable from the perspective of nuclear rivals eyeing each other with distrust.

On the contrary, there is a worrisome trend in the two countries toward a less minimalistic posture than they began with. Though both governments have resisted the pressure to shift their doctrines and postures substantially, the
pressures to do so are reflected in internal debates linked to the enhancement of capabilities such as ASAT, multiple-warhead missiles (MIRVs), and improved targeting options. The risks associated with recurring tensions along the LAC and China’s preference for evading its demarcation do not bode well for the relationship. Old problems relevant to the intent to employ marginal force remain: dual-use weapons cannot be easily identified (if at all), small-scale conventional attacks might inadvertently strike nuclear or dual-use assets, and false alarms or malfunctions of critical equipment can unleash a rapid escalatory spiral. Finally, the problems relating to cyber vulnerability apply to nuclear command-and-control systems and equipment, too. “Spoofing” could be used to send deceptive messages, for instance, to the effect that a nuclear attack has been initiated, or to initiate a nuclear launch.

Doklam Was Not an Isolated Incident

India-China antagonism has been escalating at both the political-strategic and military-strategic levels since 1998. Ironically, there is no deep ideological antipathy between the two countries, but the ideational competitiveness arising from high levels of nationalism in both has resulted in the intensification of this growing rivalry between the two nuclear powers. And, like other nuclear rivalries, it carries the numerous sources of risk discussed here. The sources of stability—military caution, willingness to engage politically, and high-level economic exchange—are not sufficient to eliminate the strategic risk.

The hard reality is that, post-Doklam, the essential situation remains unchanged. First, the uncertainties surrounding the LAC dispute have persisted, and there are no signs of movement to resolve it. Second, both sides maintain their military presence at Doklam—the “disengagement” only meant they withdrew a few hundred meters. Third, both also took measures to strengthen their positions by building infrastructure and enhancing force deployment in the area. Fourth, frictions along the border continue: in January 2018, the Indian Army turned away a Chinese road construction crew at Tuting in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, over which China claims ownership. Other small-scale incidents have occurred from time to time. And fifth, the political currents relating to Kashmir, a part of which was handed over to China by Pakistan in 1963, have exacerbated tensions. Prime Minister Modi’s August 2019 decision to revoke the special status of Kashmir in the Indian political structure evoked hostility from China, with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi calling it a “challenge” to “the sovereign rights and interests of the Chinese side.” China also pushed for a discussion in the UN Security Council, though nothing came of it.
The so-called “Wuhan reset” may be sustained for a while, helped by President Trump’s pressures on both countries through the imposition of tariffs and sanctions. But the underlying fundamentals have not changed as yet, and until they do, this is a relationship that could deteriorate further, possibly rapidly. Economic crisis, domestic political challenges, and a spurt in nationalistic fervor, or some combination thereof, could conceivably trigger a slide into sharpened confrontation and crisis, if not war, in this nuclear rivalry.

Notes


46. The conversations took place during 27–29 August 2019 and confirmed similar opinions gauged earlier in 2018 and 2019. Officials spoke to the author with the expectation of anonymity.


61. Futter, 4.


