COMMENTARY

Revelations and Opportunities: What the United States Can Learn from the Sino-Indian Crisis

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Strategists of governance, economics, and geopolitics have long known that a crisis is a terrible thing to waste. The Sino-Indian border crisis, which now seems under control, is no different.

Scuffles in mid-May between Chinese and Indian troops appeared to escalate with People's Liberation Army actions of unprecedented breadth, size, and coordination across multiple fronts. Though the Indian government sought to keep a lid on the story, reports showed signs of reinforcement and military buildup along the Line of Actual Control, the disputed border between the two countries. Soon after an initial commitment to de-escalation on June 6, brawls on June 15 at the mouth of the Galwan River Valley left 20 Indian soldiers dead — and an undetermined number of Chinese casualties — the first deaths on the border in decades. Since then, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has promised to retaliate if instigated and warned that expansionist powers would lose.

These events are of immense consequence to the United States. American policymakers have contended for years that India plays a "vital" and "pre-eminent role" in Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy. While U.S.-Indian ties have improved in the last two decades, New Delhi has often been reluctant to align too closely with Washington. The unprecedented violence, intensity of escalation, and

recognition of India's grim options have renewed optimism in the United States that this crisis with China will remove New Delhi's inhibitions and "push India toward the [United States]," prompting it to "[pick] a side in the new cold war." Indeed, China's actions are clearly galvanizing Indian strategic elites to discard hedging for a more assertive approach to the Asian balance of power. As U.S. policymakers express support, strategists like former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy have described this crisis as an opening to "accelerate and deepen security co-operation."

American defense policymakers and analysts should lean into this opportunity to improve ties with India, but also draw important lessons from this still unfolding episode to inform future strategy. First, India's resolve to balance China may be hardening, but its internal capacity to do so may be faltering. Second, the crisis has exposed or exacerbated India's problems of strategic assessment, diversion of resources to its land borders, and its dependence on Russia, which limit India's synergy with America's approach to the Indo-Pacific. If this crisis really precipitates an inflection point, analysts should observe a revised approach to the U.S.-India relationship where New Delhi undertakes to substantively balance China, Washington accommodates Indian constraints, and both demonstrate a tolerance for some difficult bargains and creative workarounds.

Solving the "Underbalancing" Problem

A crisis that heightens India's fears of Chinese aggression renews opportunities for deeper alignment with the United States. Some leaders have long hailed the promise of U.S.-Indian cooperation despite the shortfalls, particularly when it comes to balancing China. But the surprise, intensity, and publicity of this crisis may have jolted India closer to Washington's more competitive approach to Beijing. The Indian government's longtime China hands have described this as a "turning point," and analysts claim "'strategic ambiguity' is over."

India has already shown signs of this. Recently, India expedited the procurement of advanced military equipment (including the purchase or upgrade of almost 100 fighter aircraft) and pursued the early deployment of new air defense systems. India also blocked Chinese apps and obstructed much Chinese investment. It has also publicly tipped its hand at inviting Australia to military exercises with the "Quad" — the informal grouping of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States — and disinviting Huawei from its national 5G trials.

Solidified elite consensus about the Chinese threat, however, may prove insufficient. India has "underbalanced" with respect to China for years. In other words, New Delhi has been slow to build up sufficient military power or alliances to deter Chinese territorial aggrandizement. Besides structural incentives of geography, nuclear weapons, or a perceived defensive advantage, states underbalance less out of naiveté than out of a collective action problem. Serious balancing of an adversary carries considerable

costs and risks. Breaking out of underbalancing inertia requires consensus not only on the threat but also the remedy, as well as the elite and social cohesion to mobilize efforts at considerable economic and political costs. Simply put, how much defense spending will Indian society bear with "trade-offs" to development or social welfare? How much political effort will leaders expend on national security reforms at the expense of elections or social engineering? India is unlikely to easily navigate these trade-offs, particularly given eroding social cohesion, deep partisan fights, and an economy that's reeling under the pressure of the pandemic.

Indian strategic elites, cognizant of the limits to internal balancing, will likely turn to external partners for support. This would be welcome news for U.S. policymakers whose high expectations for the U.S.-Indian relationship have been met with some disappointments due to complacency and inertia on both sides. Nevertheless, American analysts should calibrate expectations given some of the challenges revealed by the crisis.

Problems of Strategic Assessment and Decision-Making

The border crisis has exposed a range of national security "software" problems in India, including deficient intelligence, poor strategic assessment, and miscommunication that may have enabled or abetted the breakdown in deterrence with China.

Accounts of serious Indian intelligence breakdowns, starting with the surprise that a People's Liberation Army exercise turned into an offensive military operation, are concerning. This may be a result of a combination of factors: insufficient technical means such as military satellite coverage (or misdirected applications by civilian agencies) to continuously monitor the border closely; analytical or interpretation failure without a proper appreciation of China's intentions; an over-concentration of intelligence and analytical assets on other threats like Pakistan or terrorist groups; or simply a breakdown in the process of moving information up the policy chain. Whatever the precise cause, India failed to take the requisite defensive actions against China despite early warning in February and several intelligence alerts by mid-April.

Second, some observers suggest India may have miscalculated and insufficiently prepared for the consequences of its extraordinary policy moves last summer that helped motivate China's actions. On Aug. 5, 2019, India took dramatic steps to revoke Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, unilaterally abrogating the autonomy provisions of the Jammu and Kashmir territory disputed with Pakistan, but also implicating its territorial disputes with China. Beijing apparently warned that India's unilateral moves were "unacceptable" and "[challenged] China's sovereignty and interests," and responded with "alarm" and "vehement protest." The first real signs of more conspicuously aggressive Chinese behavior in Ladakh began the following month. These criticisms of Indian decision-making have

been made not to excuse China's "aggressive posture," but to question whether the Indian government exercised the strategic competence to "red team" political choices, heed warnings, and prepare for consequences that some contend were eminently predictable.

Third, New Delhi has emitted confusing signals about its resolve to defend its interests. The early downplaying and denial of a crisis in May by government messaging and the ruling party leaders was noticed by China and other international audiences, and led some to question the government's resolve to defend its claimed territory. After the June 15 brawl, which resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers, Modi stated that there was no intrusion. To some, this seemed like yet another denial due to concerns about escalating the conflict, though his remarks were later clarified in a follow-up statement. Even if this was a mistake, it reveals how an Indian leader in a critical moment "did not choose his words carefully" and generated a Chinese propaganda victory. Understandably, New Delhi is trying to exercise prudence, considering the range of painful choices confronting the country, and appreciates the utility of secrecy to control escalation. But the continuous downplaying of Chinse incursions as areas of "differing perceptions" could invite further predation and deterrence breakdowns.

These national security process problems — intelligence failures, poor strategic assessment, and incoherent messaging — can lead to bad outcomes. The United States needs to be clear-eyed about this even as it seeks to advance the relationship and mitigate some of these problems. In a coalition strategy to shape the Asian balance of power, Washington is searching for partners but will have to also be mindful of what Barry Posen describes as "cheap-riders" and "reckless drivers." The events leading up to the Sino-Indian border crisis may suggest a little bit of both.

Diversion from the Maritime to the Continental

American defense planners should also pay close attention to the possibility that the crisis, rather than pushing the United States and India into alignment, could divert India's focus from high-priority U.S. objectives. China's actions, rather than expediting the formation of a counterbalancing coalition, may instead have orchestrated a strategic trap that ties down and diverts India from a more optimal balancing strategy.

During the crisis, India has rushed land and air forces forward to the border with China, and it seems plausible that it will station large numbers of forces there for years (or indefinitely, like Siachen Glacier) to defend against these types of fait accompli territorial incursions. This would be an incredibly expensive and intensive commitment due to arduous logistics and weather conditions.

Yet that might work out nicely for China. In fact, it may even be precisely what Beijing wants. As my colleague Yun Sun has noted, China believes that continued border disputes "[bog] India down as a continental power" and prevent it from projecting influence across Asia. This could effectively be a competitive strategy where Beijing seeks to create and exploit asymmetric advantages by making India spend disproportionate resources defending its land borders, thereby diverting them from more threatening postures. This is not hard to do given that a survey of Indian strategic elites suggests they are already predisposed to believe their primary challenge from China emanates from their land borders — either through direct border tensions with China or China's support for Pakistan — even though the maritime domain is where India's advantage is more quickly eroding.

A number of plausible asymmetries work in China's interest to bog India down. First, China is better prepared than India and has the advantages of infrastructure and mobility, the high ground for surveillance and artillery operations, and a unified command. Second, the features of the border that dampen the risk of escalation and lend themselves to strategic stalemate — difficult terrain and extreme weather — may also encourage minor offensive skirmishes. And as the defending power trying to "freeze" the status quo, rather than the initiating power, India has to defend against all points at all times while China can choose the time and place of its offensives or incursions. Third, if after this crisis the rivalry with China rises in political salience for India, the democratic government in India may be more politically sensitive to cheap People's Liberation Army feints on the Line of Actual Control and therefore more prone to costly mobilizations. By comparison, because of its tighter control over media and public pressure, China may be able to selectively choose to react to border events only when it needs to. These asymmetries do not mean China would seek war or believe it could prosecute one unscathed. But they do create substantial deterrence dilemmas for India that force it to commit disproportionate resources.

Though some suggest China would be equally diverted to its continental border, which could benefit U.S. strategy in the Pacific, India is unlikely to generate the "flypaper effect" that creates proportional diversion or reciprocal leverage. This owes to China's asymmetric advantages (e.g., better infrastructure, first-mover advantage, and crisis insensitivity), lower sensitivity to Indian arms buildups or military pressure outside of its highest priority theater, and ability to leverage its relationship with Pakistan to stress Indian land forces.

These continental challenges may be why Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy is primarily a maritime one. The deliberate focus on India was intended to harness the country's unique maritime geography — its greatest military advantage against China. Its naval capabilities and experience, its home-field advantage in the Indian Ocean, and its island territories and access create valuable zones

for anti-access/area denial and limited power projection. India offers a unique advantage if it is able to restrict China's ability to maneuver through airspace and waterways and to "hold at risk China's sea lines of communication" in both the western and eastern Indian Ocean through a layered maritime defense.

The United States should worry that the recent crisis could also drive force structure decisions in New Delhi, prompting India to rely more heavily on its labor-intensive 1.1 million-person army (and one million-strong paramilitary forces) to defend against future continental faits accomplis that are difficult to reverse. This could divert resources from critical modernization plans or postpone the much-needed right-sizing of a manpower-intensive, army-centric military. By contrast, a more balanced capital-intensive force would be capable of creating maritime anti-access bubbles where India could prove much more formidable because the ratio of costs favors the defense over the offense.

Already the Indian chief of defense staff has declared land borders would take priority over the maritime domain. India will be less helpful a partner for the United States if it neglects the development of its naval anti-access and distributed lethality capabilities.

Dependence on Russia

A third feature of the Sino-Indian crisis U.S. defense planners should appreciate is India's turn to Russia for arms, revealing an enduring and critical dependence. Even if India tries to lean toward the United States to counterbalance China, it will not be interested in nor capable of downgrading its relationship with Russia, which presents the United States with a serious challenge.

Washington should have noticed Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh's rapidly organized trip to Moscow to confer with Russian defense officials amid the ongoing Sino-Indian crisis. Reports suggested he had gone with the purpose of assuring an emergency supply of spare parts and equipment (including bombs and missiles), procuring new MiG-29 and Su-30 fighter aircraft, and expediting transfers of S-400 anti-aircraft batteries, all of which could play a role in the current standoff or future standoffs with China. Russia reportedly expedited the timeline of delivery by a year, but subsequent reports have indicated delivery of the S-400 remains on schedule for late 2021. However, other platforms like assault rifles and utility helicopters could be transferred quickly.

Furthermore, several news accounts suggest India has turned to Russia as a potential crisis manager. After all, some Indian analysts credited Moscow with helping to defuse the Doklam crisis in 2017 by pressing Beijing to resolve the standoff and remaining steadfastly neutral, effectively tipping things slightly in India's favor.

India's crisis outreach to Russia serves as a reminder of their robust relationship. Contrary to some claims, an analysis with other colleagues suggests India's share of Russian systems has grown, not decreased, because of Indian Army acquisitions. While India's naval and air forces are decreasing their quantitative reliance on Russian arms, their most advanced or offensive capabilities still originate from Russia. Much like the Egyptian military's reliance on Soviet platforms almost 50 years after it expelled Soviet trainers and began inducting U.S. equipment financed with $70 billion of U.S. security assistance, India's dependence on Russia is likely to endure for decades as some systems (e.g., fighter aircraft, tanks, and multiple rocket launchers) remain in India's arsenal and new systems (e.g., frigates, air defenses, and nuclear submarines) come online.

This resilient and deepening relationship with Russia will pose challenges for the U.S.-Indian partnership. While the United States treats Russia as an equally revisionist threat to the global order as China, India sees Russia as a partner to ensure a multipolar balance of power, and a hedge against a potential Sino-Russian bloc. Tactically, the sales of advanced Russian equipment complicate if not "limit" certain levels of interoperability between the Indian and U.S. militaries, not simply precluding procurement of advanced capabilities like the F-35, but also obstructing tactical communication and information systems interoperability due to potential security risks.

India's relationship with Russia also complicates its otherwise bipartisan U.S. congressional support, and has generated recurring threats of punishment from the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, even if that support is not going away anytime soon. If U.S. defense planners want to leverage greater Indian military cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, they will have to start wrestling with the trade-offs of an aggressive Russia containment policy and develop some "second-best" frameworks for both policies.

What Can America Offer India?

All things being equal, these challenges of deficient strategic assessment, continental-centrism, and Russian dependence — though structural and path-dependent but not determinative — have posed significant obstacles to a tighter U.S.-Indian alignment to balance China. But if this crisis is really an inflection point and if India is now serious about doing more heavy lifting, there are several workarounds and alternative expectations the United States could put on the table if it wishes to help shape this opportunity. With expectations of some reciprocity, the United States could help enhance India's technical intelligence and assessment capacity, directly support India's maritime deterrence complex, and work past India's Russian arms dependence.

To help redress strategic assessment shortfalls, Washington could offer better technical intelligence sharing, perhaps in a reciprocal exchange for Indian human intelligence sharing. The United States could also initiate a proposal to strengthen intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities that could include co-development of high-elevation, cold-resistant ground sensors particularly valuable on the Sino-Indian border. The resumption of a U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue (dormant since its last iteration in 2016) could enable the sharing of deeper strategic assessments. Over time, both countries could swap more fine-grained early warning data and analysis within a more institutionalized, trusted framework between intelligence bureaucracies.

To help bolster India's maritime capabilities sure to get hit by pandemic-related budget cuts and the costly demands of defending the border with China, the United States might employ tools to reduce the costs of Indian acquisitions. This would require a rethink of India less as a lucrative defense sales opportunity and more as a partner in need of cost-efficient capability boosts. Mechanisms like foreign military financing could help India acquire more P-8 maritime surveillance aircraft and reconnaissance drones to enhance India's maritime domain awareness, potentially financed with security assistance funds from the Pacific Deterrence Initiative.

Washington could also boost India's intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities on its borders through its excess defense articles program, where India could acquire high-quality equipment like Global Hawk drones for a much more reasonable price. Of course this would require India to swallow some pride in rejecting military aid and cutting through a lot of defense procurement pathologies, but crises that generate acute security concerns can motivate civilian leaders to override these concerns as India did during its 1962 war with China.

To remove a critical point of friction, the United States could come to terms with India's largely Russian arsenal and develop interoperability workarounds if India is able to harness that arsenal to deter and create dilemmas for China. This would require waiving or entirely rethinking Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act sanctions. Doing so would convert India's Russian materiel, including Brahmos missiles and the S-400 air defense system — which some U.S. analysts have praised for its counter-air capabilities, freeing assets for air-to-ground missions — from liabilities into assets in deterring China. Eventually, if American policymakers begin to worry that conflict with Russia and China overextends U.S. capabilities or incentivizes a nexus between the great powers, Washington might even start viewing India's Russia relationship as a lever to keep tabs on, constrain, or eventually wedge the Sino-Russian relationship.

Russian equipment certainly challenges U.S. interoperability with Indian forces, but Washington could develop second-best solutions. Though a common operating picture often relies on securely linked equipment and communications, the problem is not insurmountable. Technical workarounds are feasible, and "targeted interoperability" efforts such as more frequent, high-intensity

exercises on the most important joint contingencies (which India, of course, would have to be willing to pursue) could help improve the individual, command, and procedural aspects of jointly operating together.

What Should the United States Expect from India?

In exchange for providing India more intelligence sharing and security assistance, and a greater tolerance of India's relationship with Russia, it's reasonable for the United States to expect more concrete deliverables from India. These should include more forthright exchanges and joint assessments, better operationalization of deterrence, and direct diplomatic support.

A more institutionalized intelligence relationship beyond counter-terrorism would include analytical exchanges and frank assessments with Indian leaders about strategic priorities and trade-offs — including how prioritizing counter-terrorism, Pakistan, and controversial domestic policies diverts from the shared challenge of China.

The United States should also expect India to start operationalizing the defense relationship to generate deterrence against China through more visible "signals of strength" and joint capability rather than mere deterrence by association. This could involve joint planning, coordinated patrols, more frequent and complex exercises, and access to India's island territories like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands at the mouth of the Malacca Strait. Meanwhile, Washington should leverage the Quad to engage in contingency planning to clarify to each other under what conditions the Quad members — Australia, India, Japan, and the United States — would take military action.

Finally, the United States could also begin to expect more direct diplomatic support in some of its geopolitical ventures in the Indian Ocean region. Washington was caught by surprise when India supported Mauritius' challenge to Diego Garcia's status, which could threaten the United States with eviction from a critical island base. India could leverage its relationship with Mauritius to help broker a durable settlement, and expend some diplomatic capital with other regional states like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to support U.S. access and military cooperation.

Looking Ahead

Even if India and China de-escalate the current crisis peacefully, China's revealed intentions are likely to motivate a more proactive Indian balancing agenda. Increased defense spending will be difficult for a developing country suffering from the economic ravages of COVID-19, which makes deeper alignment with strategic partners the more realistic option. Crises generate not only danger and

opportunity, but also better information. The United States could do a lot to help India mitigate or redress the challenges exposed in this crisis, but the U.S. government should not be shy about asking for greater Indian reciprocity in intelligence engagement, operational coordination, and diplomatic backing to mutually enhance deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.

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Image: U.S. Army

Correction: The author confused the Maldives and Mauritius.

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