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What's Driving India-China Tensions?

Rivalry between the two Asian neighbors extends from their common border to the Indian Ocean.

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By: Dean Cheng; Sameer P. Lalwani, Ph.D.; Daniel Markey, Ph.D.; Nilanthi Samaranayake

Since deadly clashes between India and China on their 2,100-mile disputed border — known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC) — nearly four years ago, the two countries have remained in a standoff and amassed an increasing number of troops on either side of the LAC. While India and China have held [regular](#) exchanges at the corps commander level since 2020, each side has also continued to militarize and invest in infrastructure in the high-altitude border regions, which may exacerbate risks of clashes or [escalation](#). India-China competition has also deepened beyond the land border, particularly in the Indian Ocean region.



An Indian Army base in Haa, Bhutan, close to a disputed border with China, on Aug. 3, 2017. (Gilles Sabrie/The New York Times)

USIP experts Dean Cheng, Sameer Lalwani, Daniel Markey and Nilanthi Samaranayake examine what has changed on the border in the past four years, new domains where India-China competition has intensified, what role India's general elections this spring could play in shaping these dynamics and the implications for U.S.-India relations.

The standoff on the border has now lasted nearly four years. How has India's position toward China changed over this period?

Lalwani: India increasingly views China's approach to the border dispute as indicative of a broader strategy to contain India within the subcontinent and deny its rise. India's position on China has hardened — as indicated by senior [military](#) and [cabinet officials](#) critiquing China's behavior and India raising the [public salience](#) of border defense for long-term competition with China. Strategic hostility seems likely to prevail even if there is a modicum of tactical military de-escalation and disengagement on the border.

China's border intransigence also colors how New Delhi perceives Beijing's engagements throughout South Asia, including China's financial lending, military presence and [scientific surveys](#). In response, India will compete with China for influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region by increasing its military (and [nuclear](#)) modernization efforts, expanding public good instruments like physical and [digital infrastructure](#), and conducting more competitive diplomacy in partnership with like-minded partners. To compete effectively with fewer resources, India may need to be more selective, efficient and asymmetric. For instance, India risks overplaying the Chinese territorial threat by over-indexing on continental border defenses to prevent any incursions and under-resourcing its maritime and naval capabilities where India could generate greater strategic effects.

On the border itself, India has rerouted troops from its western border with Pakistan — adding another [10,000 troops](#) earlier this month — while [expanding](#) and upgrading infrastructure, including roads, tunnels and [advanced landing grounds](#) for high-altitude operations. By contrast, due to underwhelming naval budgets, India's shipbuilding plans have fallen behind by more than a decade from a [goal](#) of a 200-ship navy by 2024, to now an [aspiration](#) for a 155-ship navy by 2030.

How has China's position on the LAC changed since the start of standoff?

Cheng: China has been undertaking a sustained effort to improve its strategic infrastructure on the Sino-Indian border, predating the deadly 2020 clashes, which have been aimed, in part, on altering the status quo on the frontier. As noted in the 2023 US Department of Defense [report](#) on Chinese military developments, recent improvements range from “new villages in disputed areas in neighboring Bhutan” to “a dual-purpose airport near the center sector, and multiple helipads.” The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has also [expanded](#) road and railway capacity and army bases near the border.

This expansion of infrastructure has allowed the PLA to rotate forces regularly to the border and sustain a larger force in the Tibetan/Qinghai plateau region. This supports broader PLA efforts of the last decade to maintain a more capable forward presence. These efforts include the development of a new light tank (the Type 15), which has been [deployed](#) to the Sino-Indian border, improved PLA Special Operations Forces (SOF) and armed combat air patrols of the Qinghai Plateau. Other aspects of Chinese military modernization — including the fielding of additional airborne early warning and electronic warfare aircraft, better missiles and rocket artillery, and improvements in PLA Army Aviation helicopter forces — benefit not only China's ability to threaten Taiwan but India as well. Similarly, China's steadily advancing space capabilities allow it to maintain regular surveillance of Indian moves across all three sectors, without violating Indian territory.

This combination of strengthened conventional (and space and cyber) capabilities, coupled with an expanding nuclear force, as well as major infrastructure improvements, allows China to maintain a significant qualitative edge over its Indian counterparts. China can sustain a substantial military force, which allows it to escalate and de-escalate rapidly, as well as respond to any Indian countermoves — which are limited by the far less developed infrastructure on the Indian side of the LAC.

Chinese actions on the LAC may also be, in part, a means of intimidating India or politically signaling to New Delhi that it should not join any anti-China coalition. This may gain greater urgency with questions about the succession of the aging Dalai Lama — as India hosts the Tibetan Parliament in Exile — and China would like to neutralize any influence the organization may have in the wake of the Tibetan spiritual leader's passing.

Beyond the land border, how have India and China fared in other domains — particularly in the Indian Ocean?

Cheng: For China, the Indian Ocean is a critical point of trade routes, but China has also steadily expanded its military presence in the region. China's naval deployments included a [regular rotation](#) of naval escorts to the Gulf of Aden [since 2008](#) — which typically includes frigates and destroyers along with People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) officers and at times Special Operations Forces — along with submarines and submarine tenders. The tenders can refuel and rearm submarines allowing them to undertake extended missions. These tenders have taken [at least](#) one port call to Sri Lanka. Further sustainment and servicing can be undertaken in Djibouti, where China has established its first formal overseas military base.

China has also sought to expand relations with several island nations in the Indian Ocean region, including Sri Lanka, Seychelles and Maldives. Reports of China negotiating for [access](#) to the Seychelles for its naval forces, and possibly for UAVs,

reflect China's interests (although nothing has come of these negotiations). Beijing has [agreed](#) to offer Maldives "military assistance," which is in addition to Chinese [provision](#) of substantial loans and aid. India remains concerned about Chinese port projects in the region — including past reports that China was interested in access to the Coco Islands, which are owned by Myanmar. While China has [denied](#) an interest, access to the islands would place Chinese forces relatively close to the western entrance of the Malacca Strait and in close proximity to India's outposts in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Samaranayake: While the Indian Ocean theater is exposing areas of anxiety for India, it is also showcasing its strengths. The largest source of anxiety is China's expanding data collection activity at sea. Chinese research ships — including [two](#) in the past month — have been observed conducting surveys in the Indian Ocean. Indian experts believe that Beijing conducts these [deployments](#) to track Indian missile tests and increase its understanding of the undersea domain to support submarine operations. Exacerbating India's concern is the fact that its neighbor, Maldives, recently agreed to permit a [visit](#) by *Xiang Yang Hong 3*, a Chinese research vessel, to replenish supplies.

Strained relations with Maldives are another area of growing concern. Maldives' new president, Mohamed Muizzu, followed through on his campaign pledge to remove India's military presence from the island nation after nearly 15 years of access. He also accepted China's invitation for a state visit in January and agreed this month to a grant of "[non-lethal](#)" military [assistance](#) such as training, tear gas and pepper spray, according to details released to Maldivian media.

While these developments have unnerved New Delhi in a domain where it has actively invested its diplomatic and military resources, it is important not to overstate the challenges facing India in the Indian Ocean.

First, Maldives has compromised on the issue of India's military presence by permitting Indian civilians to replace military personnel in operating two helicopters and one fixed-wing aircraft. Second, both Maldives and India continued their participation in the high-profile DOSTI and MILAN exercises in February in Malé and Visakhapatnam, respectively. Third, while Muizzu's election disrupted India's preferred approach to conducting aerial security cooperation with Maldives, New Delhi's willingness to work with the new leadership's [preferences](#) demonstrates greater [adaptation](#) in its policies of Neighborhood First and Security and Growth for All in the Region. Indian officials recently commissioned a military base, [INS Jatayu](#), in Minicoy island — the site of an existing naval detachment and closest territory to Maldives — in part due to recognition of India's altered military access to its neighbor, but continued requirements to maintain awareness of the regional maritime domain.

More broadly, India's naval and air operations to rescue [merchant ships](#) under attack, participation in the [Cutlass Express](#) exercise in [Seychelles](#), and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's inauguration of an airstrip and jetty on Agaléga island in [Mauritius](#) have all recently highlighted the country's expanding influence and operational reach in the western Indian Ocean. This stands in contrast to [criticism](#) of China for insufficient responses to Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and wider disruptions to Indian Ocean sea lanes. While India continues to be wary of what China might learn or do with partners in the region, its actions have demonstrated its comparative advantages in the Indian Ocean theater.

What role could India's general elections, planned for the spring, play in how Indian leadership approaches the border conflict and its relationship with China more broadly?

Markey: In the lead-up to the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) bid for another parliamentary majority, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi faces a high-stakes balancing act with China.

On the one hand, Modi and his party cannot yield ground to opposition party politicians who will undoubtedly [criticize](#) his government for losing ground — literally and figuratively — to India's giant neighbor. To that end, Modi has recently taken a series of steps intended to demonstrate his toughness in the face of Chinese bullying. He has, for instance, [visited](#) Arunachal Pradesh state — territory claimed by China; inaugurated construction of the [Sela Tunnel](#), designed specifically to enable better defense of the contested region of Tawang against Chinese aggression; and test [launched](#) a MIRVed nuclear-capable missile ranged to threaten most of China and, presumably, to preserve India's credible nuclear deterrent against an [expanding](#) Chinese arsenal. Like the much-celebrated [consecration](#) of the Ram Temple and the [announcement](#) of rules for implementing the polarizing Citizenship Amendment Act, most of these recent steps have been under development for a long time. Still, this slew of recent, high-profile activities is hard to understand outside the context of India's national elections.

On the other hand, Modi knows that China enjoys military, economic and diplomatic advantages over India. Unprompted, China is unlikely to try to provoke trouble with India, knowing that such moves could backfire; but if pushed too far, Beijing could expose India's vulnerabilities in a variety of [sectors](#). And China's own strategic ambitions mean that it is unlikely to give ground in any way that would encourage Modi's nationalistic tendencies. All of this means that Modi's politically motivated toughness toward China cannot tip so far that it worsens the problem it was meant to deter.

That leaves Modi's India in a bind. At least since the bloody skirmishes of 2020, a new politically and strategically sustainable equilibrium has remained [elusive](#). And across India's neighborhood, China continues to find influence with [smaller](#) powers that

have historically perceived India as a regional hegemon. As such, we should anticipate a China-India stalemate at least until after India's electoral dust settles. Then, after what is most [likely](#) to be a strong BJP showing, perhaps New Delhi and Beijing will seek ways to normalize their diplomacy, even though their fundamental differences are sure to persist.

What impact could the standoff have on India-U.S. relations?

Lalwani: China's border hostility makes India increasingly prone to partner with the United States and other G7 countries to counter malign Chinese political, economic and military influence even while remaining committed to a multi-aligned posture that also stands for the Global South. Cooperation with the West has begun to include economic cooperation to build diversified and resilient supply chains; [critical technology collaboration](#) in areas like semiconductors, telecoms and high-performance computing; political alignments, through the Quad, on a set of [rules to manage global order](#); and [military cooperation](#) in domains from the undersea to space.

Defense relations are especially poised to accelerate as the U.S. and Indian militaries not only share intelligence and exercise together, but are now starting to [build advanced capabilities](#) together, allow access to each other's basing facilities, share the burdens of operating alongside each other (as they may be starting to do in the North Arabian and Red Seas) and eventually jointly build contingency plans to deter future crises. Continued tensions on the LAC suggest that India's policy toward China is likely to become increasingly adversarial, and its alignment with the United States will grow stronger.

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