

AUGUST 2020

# At a Crossroads? China-India Nuclear Relations After the Border Clash

Toby Dalton and Tong Zhao

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## Summary

On June 15, 2020, a lethal military conflict over disputed territory in the Himalayas shook the edifice of China-India relations. The clash in the Galwan Valley along their shared border is the gravest military confrontation the two nuclear powers have faced in fifty years. This event and ongoing tensions focus attention on the long-standing but tempered competition between China and India. One of the most interesting puzzles of that relationship is why nuclear weapons, which both possess, have not played a more important role. With the potential for a major reset in China-India ties after the Ladakh crisis, are Beijing and New Delhi finally approaching a long-anticipated crossroads in their nuclear relations?<sup>1</sup>

Although India's perspectives on such issues are relatively well documented, China's views continue to be largely unknown, as there is very little public discussion of the bilateral nuclear relationship. To fill this information gap and help illustrate Chinese thinking about the present and future status of China-India nuclear relations, we reviewed publicly available relevant Chinese literature and conducted interviews with senior Chinese experts.

The findings reveal that while Indian security analysts give serious attention to China's nuclear policy and capabilities, Chinese analysts maintain a dismissive attitude about the relevance of nuclear weapons in China-India relations. The attitude stems from a widely held view that India's indigenous military technologies are significantly behind China's and that China will continue widening the gulf between the two countries' conventional and nuclear capabilities. However, Chinese analysts do not appear to fully appreciate the long-term destabilizing implications of this growing gap. India may feel pressure to build out its nuclear arsenal, and this could further threaten the fragile stability between India and Pakistan. Chinese experts tend to underestimate the role Beijing may have in shaping New Delhi's threat perception and nuclear strategy.

They also downplay the risk of nuclear escalation in any conventional conflict with India, though they do worry about an India-Pakistan nuclear conflict. Those interviewed believe that both China and India pursue defensive strategies and that civilian politicians not only understand the importance of avoiding nuclear conflicts but also retain complete authority over nuclear command and control. Chinese experts remain optimistic that nuclear weapons are a stabilizing factor in the bilateral relationship rather than a source for concern—even though the tempering effects of economic interdependence may be waning and the strength of both countries' nuclear no-first-use policies is facing growing internal scrutiny.

On the other hand, as the U.S.-China competition intensifies, analysts in Beijing are acutely aware of how New Delhi's defense technology cooperation with Washington may bring India closer to the U.S. orbit and change the geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific region. Due to the widely expressed Chinese concern that India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) would further enhance its importance in the United States' Asia strategy, there is little support for changing China's long-standing opposition to India's admission into the group. Despite the potential for future instability and conflict, most Chinese experts question the viability of holding official bilateral nuclear dialogue with India for the foreseeable future—although there is support for expert-level engagement to discuss mutual concerns.

## Introduction

In the aftermath of the June 2020 border clash, senior retired Indian diplomats argued that the conflict marks the “end of a chapter in relations”<sup>2</sup> and that “the entire architecture [of border and military agreements between China and India] has collapsed,”<sup>3</sup> with “very serious repercussions.”<sup>4</sup> If ties between the two powerful neighbors are indeed entering a more sharply competitive era, a crucial question arises: will nuclear weapons play a more prominent role as each country seeks to shape each other’s behavior?

So far, despite both countries possessing nuclear arsenals and periodic border dispute flare-ups, nuclear deterrence has not been a main or even secondary feature of their relationship. Unlike India-Pakistan or China-U.S. relations, in which the potential for nuclear weapons use has hung over their military interactions, China-India relations have been tempered by decades of stable political ties and shared economic priorities. Threat perceptions between Beijing and New Delhi have concentrated instead on their disputed borders in the Himalayas and their suspicions about the strategic relations each has built with the other’s main adversary—China with Pakistan and India with the United States. Nuclear weapons have mostly remained in the shadows, including during the 2020 border standoff.<sup>5</sup>

However, trends in both countries suggest the potential for a more overt nuclear deterrence relationship. Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi are both political “strongmen” who project muscular security policies and seek to harness rising nationalist sentiments. Under their leadership, Beijing and New Delhi are improving their nuclear arsenals and conventional military capabilities, while ongoing debates in both capitals question the wisdom of continued adherence to nuclear restraint policies. Such technical and political developments could generate a new nuclear deterrence paradigm in Southern Asia if relations between the two states take a more belligerent turn.

India’s perspectives on the two countries’ nuclear relationship are relatively well documented. Indian strategists, academics, and retired officials and military officers often write on the role Beijing plays in India’s strategic calculus and the perceived threat from China’s nuclear and military capabilities. Some also argue that nuclear deterrence exists between the two states, though without articulating what putative Chinese behavior is deterred or dissuaded by India’s nuclear weapons. Former Indian national security adviser Shivshankar Menon asserts, for instance, that “India-China nuclear deterrence is stable and will likely remain so despite shifts leading to equilibrium at higher technological levels as both programs develop increasing sophistication.”<sup>6</sup>



Conversely, in China, there is no established narrative, let alone debate, about India's nuclear weapons and the implications for Chinese security. Few Chinese nuclear experts even think about nuclear issues in Southern Asia.<sup>7</sup> They tend to focus on the United States and, to a lesser extent, Russia. Similarly, China's South Asia watchers rarely consider nuclear weapons, focusing instead on regional relations and economic and political matters. The lack of intersection between China's nuclear and South Asia expert communities both explains and reinforces the paucity of attention paid by Beijing to the China-India nuclear relationship. The extent to which Chinese nuclear policy already accounts for a nascent nuclear arms competition with India, or how future developments might contribute to a more overt nuclear deterrence relationship, remains unclear.

To better understand Chinese perspectives on the present and future state of China-India nuclear relations, we reviewed relevant Chinese literature published within the last decade and interviewed a dozen Chinese academics, researchers, and military officers who work either on South Asia or on nuclear policy. (These interviews occurred in fall 2019, prior to the 2020 border crisis, but it seems unlikely that developments since the interviews would significantly alter the findings.) A broad set of questions were asked. For example, could technology, policy, or political developments in India or China change the fundamentals of their bilateral nuclear relations? Is it possible that technology developments alone, such as the augmentation of offensive and defensive systems, would result in more overt nuclear deterrence, or would it also depend on policy changes, such as the withdrawal of no-first-use (NFU) pledges? And what might a new China-India nuclear relationship look like?

This research reveals new insights on mainstream perspectives within the Chinese policy community and explains the reasons for sanguine Chinese attitudes about India's nuclear weapons. The interviews highlight the risk that future technical and political developments could surface a nuclear deterrence relationship that will require more hands-on management by Beijing and New Delhi.

### **"India is not on the radar screen."<sup>8</sup>**

Chinese experts do not think of India in strategic terms. They see India mainly as a regional rival. The sense of superior power over India among Chinese officials and experts is long-standing and deep. Convinced that China's governance system has and will continue to outperform that of India's, Chinese experts have little doubt that China will maintain and enhance its military and nuclear advantages over India.

In terms of military and nuclear capability, "China is and will remain at least ten years ahead for the foreseeable future," one Chinese military expert noted.<sup>9</sup> A Chinese nuclear expert argued that India's "small arsenal can deter, but there is a qualitative gap" with China.<sup>10</sup> Sustained superiority in military

capability is the key contributor to China's sense of security vis-à-vis India. It also enables China to continue focusing its nuclear modernization and strategic planning on the United States and Russia.

Accordingly, China's nuclear weapons are primarily postured against the United States and the threat of U.S. intervention in a conflict in East Asia (for instance, in a Taiwan contingency). Over the past few decades, China's nuclear modernization programs have been driven by a perceived increase in military threats from the United States. That said, Chinese missiles garrisoned in its interior could cover parts of India. Some of the DF-21 missiles deployed in northwestern and southwestern China, for instance, may be nuclear armed. China may also have deployed dual-capable DF-26 missiles (which can carry either nuclear or conventional warheads) in southwestern China. Some reports indicate that DF-26 systems have appeared at missile facilities in Xinjiang.<sup>11</sup> Given the strike ranges of these missiles, India appears to be a main potential target. Yet the strategic sentiment of most Chinese experts is that "China's nuclear weapons are not directed at India."<sup>12</sup>

### **"Interdependence means China and India can't afford to be enemies."<sup>13</sup>**

Beijing perceives China-India relations as relatively cooperative, driven by their shared interests as large developing countries and as rising players in global politics. "China doesn't think of India as a threat," one Chinese academic observed.<sup>14</sup> But Chinese analysts see the relationship as more competitive at the regional level. Contributing to this view are issues such as the Himalayas border dispute and the countries' contrasting relations with Pakistan and divergent visions for the future security structure of the Indo-Pacific.

Traditionally, Chinese strategists view nuclear weapons as instruments primarily for strategic deterrence. The overall positive relationship between Beijing and New Delhi renders nuclear weapons less relevant. Chinese experts are optimistic that India aims to maintain a favorable international environment for economic development and has little incentive for a major conflict with China. They believe that the countries' extensive economic interdependence will deter current and future Indian leaders from fundamentally altering bilateral relations. "Interdependence does not mean that India won't see China as a strategic rival," one Chinese analyst suggested, "but it would prevent the use of nuclear weapons."<sup>15</sup>

However, the tempering effect of economic interdependence seems to be waning because of the nationalist politics of Xi and Modi. Both leaders are embracing a more assertive posture toward all rivals, including each other; attributing military tensions to the other side's hostility; and demanding that soldiers be firm to defend national borders and strongly push back against perceived aggression. These developments increase the likelihood that border clashes will escalate. The June 15 border

incident and its aftermath is evidence of this trend. Further Indian efforts to distance itself from China politically and economically—including the forging of closer security ties with Russia and the United States and the banning of hundreds of popular Chinese software applications—will continue to diminish the role of interdependence as a buffer to strategic competition.

### **“India is only concerned with prestige, not with deterrence.”<sup>16</sup>**

Chinese experts tend to view both countries’ security strategies as defense-oriented. They believe India’s nuclear weapons program is primarily driven by prestige and the pursuit of international status, not by an offensive military agenda. And they maintain a relatively relaxed attitude toward India’s growing nuclear capabilities, which “don’t add to deterrence versus China.”<sup>17</sup> These attitudes persist even though India has deployed a nuclear-armed submarine, tested an anti-satellite missile, and reportedly begun developing a multiple warhead capability for its ballistic missiles.<sup>18</sup> Despite being able to reach Chinese territory, India’s long-range nuclear missiles are not seen as an immediate threat. Chinese experts tend to argue that these weapons are for general deterrence and not for actual employment.

Therefore, India’s nuclear capability and policy developments do not seem to have much effect on China’s strategic outlook. And because Beijing does not attribute India’s nuclear modernization to an aggressive military posture, Chinese experts do not see the need to respond strongly and immediately to India’s progress. This generally relaxed attitude may contribute positively to a stable nuclear relationship. That said, a Chinese academic noted, “There are always people in decisionmaking circles who worry, so if the nuclear threat from India increases, then some in China will argue for a response.”<sup>19</sup>

Chinese analysts also tend to believe that their country’s policies and actions do not affect India’s nuclear policies, despite clear beliefs in New Delhi to the contrary. This lack of Chinese sensitivity to Indian views of bilateral nuclear relations has created a situation that could be termed “decoupled deterrence.” Unlike a security spiral based on successive actions and reactions between two adversaries, in decoupled deterrence only the smaller or weaker power takes security-seeking steps in response to actions by the bigger power, which are motivated by a different threat. So in this case, India may respond to Chinese developments, but not vice versa, as China remains focused on the threat from the United States. Meanwhile, Beijing’s lack of understanding of New Delhi’s threat perception, disinterest in addressing India’s security concerns, and gradual effort to strengthen its own nuclear forces could add fuel to India’s perceived need to boost its strategic capabilities and nuclear arsenal.

Underlying analysts' views is a widely held belief in Beijing that China has little influence over India's nuclear policy making since it is driven by prestige rather than military considerations and China is only "a secondary or even tertiary factor."<sup>20</sup> For instance, some analysts with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) believe that India's nuclear thinking is inward-looking: India has set its standard for credible nuclear deterrence, independent from the capabilities and postures of its rivals.<sup>21</sup> They predict that India will continue building up its nuclear forces until its own standard of nuclear sufficiency is met and that other countries, including China, can do little to influence this process. As one Chinese military expert told us, "China is an excuse for India, a general rationale, but now [under Modi] there is an internal rationale" for India's nuclear policies.<sup>22</sup>

### **"Border disputes are unlikely to escalate to nuclear conflicts."<sup>23</sup>**

Both India and China have declared nuclear NFU policies, which in theory should prevent a border conflict from escalating to a nuclear level. Although some Chinese strategists voice concerns about the risk of a nuclear escalation between India and Pakistan, they rarely express apprehension about the escalation of a China-India conventional confrontation. "Both sides know war shouldn't happen, so crises shouldn't escalate. But China is also preparing along the border and there is more attention given to this issue by the Chinese public," one Chinese academic observed.<sup>24</sup>

Chinese analysts are generally optimistic about the stabilizing effect of nuclear weapons in deescalating conventional conflicts and often claim that "as two nuclear possessors, even if there is a large-scale conflict, they (China and India) would manage to keep it under control."<sup>25</sup> Chinese thinking includes a long-standing assumption that big powers with large territories are very unlikely to face existential threats, and, therefore, it is unnecessary to resort to nuclear weapons.<sup>26</sup> The Chinese view that both states' decisions are primarily driven by defensive strategic objectives may also contribute to Beijing's lack of concern.

In addition, Chinese experts believe that certain bureaucratic and technical factors in India lower the risk of escalation. At the bureaucratic level, Chinese experts feel confident that India's nuclear command and control authority rests firmly with civilian decisionmakers and that India's political leaders clearly understand the imperative to avoid a nuclear conflict.

At the technical level, the treacherous, high-altitude mountainous terrain would make it hard for a border conflict to escalate even to a large-scale, high-tempo conventional war. Furthermore, neither state possesses a clear conventional superiority over the other, even if local factors at some border

areas may favor one state or the other. India may have more troops near some hotspots along the border, but Chinese analysts believe that any force gap could be filled quickly because of China's more advanced transportation infrastructure and ability to rapidly mobilize troops from its hinterland. In their view, the perception that neither country could quickly overwhelm the other in a conventional conflict reduces the pressure to escalate to nuclear weapons.

From our research and interviews, it is difficult to determine whether this Chinese optimism is well founded. One interview subject, for instance, wondered aloud, "If India faces territorial defeat [to China], do nuclear weapons come into play?"<sup>27</sup> A serious conventional conflict over the border seems more plausible after the deadly fistfight in the Galwan Valley.<sup>28</sup> Although no shots were fired during the clash due to a decades-long confidence-building measure to ban the use of firearms, after the incident, India reportedly altered its rules of military engagement to permit the use of firearms near the Line of Actual Control, increasing the risk that disputes will result in casualties.<sup>29</sup>

In recent years, some Chinese experts have observed that India's military strategy toward China is shifting to "fighting short high-intensity wars," which could increase escalation pressures in a more compressed timeline.<sup>30</sup> The fog of war could become thicker if future high-intensity border conflicts involve interference or destruction of situational awareness capabilities early in the fight, making misperception, misunderstanding, and misjudgment more likely.

### **"New technologies that are entangled with nuclear weapons are more important for stability than nuclear weapons themselves."<sup>31</sup>**

If a border dispute were to escalate into a larger military confrontation, additional inadvertent escalation risks could come from the co-location or mixing of nuclear and conventional missiles and the challenges of distinguishing between nuclear and non-nuclear systems. Most Indian and Chinese dual-capable military assets are theater-range (short-, medium-, and intermediate-range) weapons, whereas strategic, long-range missiles are exclusively armed with nuclear weapons. As noted earlier, China's theater-range, dual-capable weapons include the DF-21 and DF-26.<sup>32</sup> India's dual-capable systems include fighter bomber aircraft; short-range missiles like Prithvi, Prahaar, and Agni-I; and perhaps also the medium-range Agni-II ballistic missile.<sup>33</sup> If dual-capable weapons and their associated equipment and facilities were destroyed in a conventional attack against, for example, India's Ambala Air Force Station or China's missile facilities near Korla, the attacked party could wonder whether the strike was aimed deliberately at its nuclear assets and whether a response in-kind—or even a direct nuclear retaliation—could be necessary. This risk is not completely theoretical. Some

reports suggest that PLA strategists may be contemplating the early use of missile strikes against Indian air bases.<sup>34</sup> And at least some Chinese experts assess that “the Indian army and air force may not have the capacity or will to distinguish nuclear facilities from conventional targets.”<sup>35</sup>

Also posing a risk of nuclear use is the Chinese and Indian deployment of nuclear weapons on submarines in the open oceans, potentially subjecting their nuclear weapons to greater threat of destruction by conventional forces. Although there is no evidence that China is deploying nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) to the Indian Ocean, India may view China’s diesel-electric and nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) operating in the Indian Ocean as a threat to its incipient SSBN force, especially during periods of heightened military tension. Similarly, some Chinese strategists are concerned that in a bilateral military conflict, India may send its attack submarines to the South China Sea to intercept Chinese naval forces sailing to the Indian Ocean. The South China Sea is reportedly the main operating area for China’s SSBNs,<sup>36</sup> and the deployment of Indian attack submarines there could significantly increase Chinese concerns about their security.

### **“Some Indian technology developments could trigger Chinese reaction.”<sup>37</sup>**

India’s advancements in nuclear weapons technology generally do not concern Chinese analysts. They believe India’s nuclear developments are about gaining prestige and achieving big power status, rather than responding militarily to China’s nuclear modernization. Nevertheless, in our interviews, analysts voiced concerns about a few prospective Indian technology developments.

Potential Indian deployment of tactical nuclear weapons elicited the strongest concern, although mostly due to escalation risks in the India-Pakistan context.<sup>38</sup> Fielding tactical nuclear weapons “would be stupid of Indian leaders,” one Chinese military expert declared.<sup>39</sup> Another Chinese nuclear expert argued, “If India develops tactical nuclear weapons or considers nuclear warfighting, it could undermine stability, lower the threshold for use, and contribute to escalation.”<sup>40</sup>

Other analysts expressed concern about specific technologies that might affect the ability to mitigate a crisis or arms race. Chinese experts tend not to worry about new Indian technologies such as missiles that can carry multiple warheads (known as MIRVs), anti-satellite weapons, and strategic nuclear submarines because these technologies are “India’s ticket to the big powers club,” as one interviewee claimed.<sup>41</sup> However, they acknowledge that other technologies may contribute to greater crisis instability during certain operations, such as cyber interference in nuclear command and control systems; the use of unmanned maritime vehicles to detect, track, and threaten SSBNs; and

the possible deployment by India of canisterized nuclear missiles—missiles that are stored in sealed canisters so they can be transported easily and launched quickly. Such capabilities could decrease decisionmaking time during a crisis.

Interestingly, although Chinese officials express strong concerns about the potential for U.S. missile defense technologies to erode China's nuclear deterrent, analysts in Beijing appear relaxed about India's potential development of an antiballistic missile system. In particular, they are skeptical of the maturity and reliability of India's missile defense technology to provide effective homeland defense for India in the foreseeable future. "The contribution of missile defense to India's deterrence credibility is limited," one nuclear expert told us.<sup>42</sup> That said, some analysts are concerned by the possibility that theater antiballistic missile systems positioned by India in the border region could diminish the efficacy of Chinese medium-range missiles deployed in the western part of the country, which could play a role in a serious conflict with India. In that instance, some analysts fear that missile defenses may embolden India's military behavior in a future border confrontation.<sup>43</sup>

Conversely, Chinese analysts have given little attention to the potential impacts of China's missile defense programs on India. Given that India's nuclear arsenal is comparatively smaller, if China sought to expand its missile defense capabilities, India might feel pressure to increase its arsenal. However, there is no indication that Chinese officials are acknowledging or accounting for this potential risk in their deliberations about missile defense. Similarly, Chinese analysts do not connect India's potential interest in developing MIRVed missiles and/or hypersonic weapons with New Delhi's threat perception related to China's missile defense, even though Indian experts have documented this linkage.<sup>44</sup>

**"The emphasis on NFU in Indian nuclear policy . . . is a result of prudent strategic consideration."<sup>45</sup>**

Both China and India maintain official NFU nuclear pledges, and Chinese experts tend to view both countries' policies as independent of each other. Chinese analysts are following India's domestic debate on NFU but are skeptical that any changes would affect China's policy. "If India wants to be responsible, it won't change its no-first-use policy," one Chinese analyst argued.<sup>46</sup>

China's ongoing but relatively muted debate over no first use "is influenced by the United States, not by India," many analysts argued.<sup>47</sup> However, if India were to nullify its NFU policy and also begin deploying tactical nuclear weapons—the same actions that China believes the United States is

embracing through its emphasis on low-yield nuclear weapons and perceived effort to lower the threshold for nuclear use—the Chinese nuclear establishment might feel pressure to reconsider its traditional policy.

Perceptions that India's NFU and other nuclear policies are independent of China's actions have also contributed to the lack of interest among Chinese experts to clarify perceived ambiguities over its policy. In the case of NFU, some Indian strategists suspect that China's policy would not apply to the country's own territories.<sup>48</sup> In other words, if a bilateral border conflict escalates to a general conflict, China might use nuclear weapons against Indian troops on Chinese-claimed territory. Chinese experts believe this is a complete misperception, but they have yet to clarify the policy with India. They are likely unaware of how much this misperception actually impacts India's nuclear policy deliberation.

### **"The United States is using a military binding strategy to gradually ally with India against China."<sup>49</sup>**

While Chinese analysts largely dismiss India's homegrown development of new military capabilities, they express concern about the prospect of U.S.-India collaboration on defense projects. Chinese experts are particularly wary of U.S.-India missile defense cooperation and the possibility that it could create a networked system. If such a system was to emerge, they would see India as a de facto security ally of the United States.<sup>50</sup> (They took a similar view of U.S.-South Korea cooperation, evidenced by the 2016 Chinese use of unilateral soft sanctions against South Korea after Seoul agreed to host U.S. missile defenses to protect against a North Korean missile attack. To resolve the issue, Beijing exacted a promise that Seoul would not join a U.S.-led missile defense network or a U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral alliance.)

Yet it appears that Chinese analysts are less concerned about the substance of India's cooperation with foreign partners on nuclear and related capabilities than on what such cooperation indicates about India's future security partnerships and the implications for China's strategic balance. Our interviewees often talked about the U.S.-China competition for influence over India, and there is growing concern that the United States is using defense technology cooperation "as a key instrument to accelerate (U.S.-India) bilateral strategic binding."<sup>51</sup>



A more immediate concern for Chinese experts is instability within South Asia as a result of Indian nuclear developments and policy changes. “Improvements in India’s nuclear technology or arsenal are not a concern for China, only for Pakistan,” one Chinese academic assessed.<sup>52</sup> Many Chinese experts do not acknowledge, at least publicly, that the measures India takes to counter China’s growing nuclear capability and to pursue assured nuclear retaliation may look to Pakistan like efforts to gain nuclear superiority.<sup>53</sup> In response, Pakistan could increase its nuclear capabilities, making nuclear weapon use in a future crisis more likely. A more intensified nuclear competition in South Asia and greater risk of nuclear use would inevitably affect China’s geostrategic interests in this region, especially its plans to promote stability and greater economic integration through the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in particular.

“The strategic balance in South Asia is important for China,” a Chinese analyst told us.<sup>54</sup> Such concerns about the nuclear balance in South Asia contextualize China’s long-running effort to help Pakistan keep pace with India<sup>55</sup>—though China’s assistance to Pakistan’s nuclear and missile programs remains a taboo topic of discussion for Chinese analysts.

Chinese experts generally assess that if the United States becomes less involved in mediating nuclear crises between India and Pakistan, the risk of nuclear conflict between the two South Asian countries will increase. Some analysts argue that due to China’s growing economic interests in this region, China has a stake in maintaining regional stability and should show a stronger willingness to help prevent future military crises from escalating to the nuclear level.<sup>56</sup> One interviewee also pointed to the “weakening U.S.-China trust” and diverging U.S.-China interests in South Asia as another potential incentive for China to get more deeply involved in regional affairs itself, rather than leaving it to the United States to manage.<sup>57</sup>

It is not surprising that Chinese analysts are considering how China might protect its growing interests in Southern Asia. However, our research shows that hard questions pertaining to nuclear and military issues are missing in Beijing’s discourse on this issue. For example, if China wants to build an image as a neutral mediator, does it first need to stabilize its military relationship with India, including mutual nuclear deterrence? To assuage Indian concerns that future Chinese military moves along the border may be aimed at advancing China’s territorial claims, rather than helping contain a military crisis between India and Pakistan, does China first need to settle its territorial disputes with India? Is China willing to condition its political and security support to Pakistan on the latter’s cooperation on terrorism issues and self-restraint over military activities near Kashmir? There appears to be no in-depth thinking or discussion among Chinese analysts on how China can navigate these issues while increasing its leverage in Southern Asia. Until such domestic debate occurs in China, the international community should not expect China to play a significant mediating role.

## **“India’s Nuclear Suppliers Group waiver was ok, but not membership.”<sup>58</sup>**

Relatively few Chinese analysts express much concern about the threat posed to China by India’s nuclear weapons, but most of the Chinese experts interviewed—including all the regional experts focused on South Asia—argued that India should not be admitted to the NSG. In contrast to the lack of interest and attention to China-India nuclear deterrence, the strength and relative uniformity of Chinese views on this matter was notable. Though China acquiesced in 2008 to waiving NSG requirements that enabled India to participate in nuclear energy technology trade, it has drawn a solid line on India’s admission into the group. Chinese analysts seem to be more wary of the international status that NSG membership would afford India than of India’s nuclear technology or policy developments.

When the subject of India’s nuclear weapons is raised to Chinese analysts, invariably they argue that India is not a legitimate possessor of nuclear weapons under international law. The rejection of India’s legitimate nuclear status contributes to China’s position that there needs to be an international consensus first on how to incorporate non-member states of the Non-Proliferation Treaty into NSG in order to avoid “undermining the global nonproliferation regime.”<sup>59</sup>

Chinese analysts also acknowledge Pakistan’s concern that India’s NSG membership would increase the country’s nuclear development capacity, giving it an advantage that could “disrupt the nuclear strategic balance in South Asia.”<sup>60</sup> They also worry that NSG membership could “further enhance India’s importance in the U.S.’ South Asian strategy.”<sup>61</sup> Such geopolitical considerations may become more prominent if the China-India relationship takes a significant turn toward confrontation following the Galwan Valley clash. Some previous proposals by Chinese experts to resolve the NSG membership issue through mutual concessions at the practical level—such as to support India’s membership in return for Indian support of the Belt and Road Initiative<sup>62</sup>—would become increasingly untenable under such conditions.

## **“Official bilateral nuclear dialogue is unnecessary, but unofficial talks can be useful.”<sup>63</sup>**

With China-India nuclear issues remaining in the background, most Chinese analysts do not perceive a need for formal dialogue with India. “India is only concerned with prestige, not deterrence; therefore, dialogue doesn’t matter,” argued one Chinese academic.<sup>64</sup> Others reject dialogue because China and India are not peers as legitimate nuclear states and big powers. “India has some capability,

but it is still far from a credible deterrent,” one Chinese nuclear expert stated.<sup>65</sup> Analysts are generally confident that China will maintain and even widen its nuclear superiority over India and thus dismiss the risk of nuclear conflict.

Indian experts, however, apparently see things differently. As one senior Indian nuclear policy expert argues, “As India’s nuclear capability grows and is more credibly deployed against China, Beijing will see sense in engagement in nuclear issues to address the risks.”<sup>66</sup>

This disconnect between Indian and Chinese beliefs raises interesting questions for Beijing. Will China’s lack of recognition of mutual nuclear deterrence inadvertently motivate India to advance its nuclear and other strategic military capabilities? Will the asymmetric security competition involving China, India, and Pakistan increase the risk of nuclear use as China-India and India-Pakistan relations become tenser?

Looking ahead, China’s views of nuclear relations with India are unlikely to change any time soon, but there appears to be growing interest in having informal discussions at the unofficial level. Many Chinese experts that we interviewed agree on the importance to discuss the impact of new technologies on the bilateral nuclear relationship, as well as on maritime issues. “In reality, China should have a nuclear dialogue with India, but Chinese foreign policy currently doesn’t permit it,” a Chinese analyst opined.<sup>67</sup> Still, some have proposed a China-India-Pakistan trilateral talk on this subject. Others specifically noted the important role that Indian defense scientists play in influencing domestic decisionmaking in India as a reason for engagement.<sup>68</sup> In the absence of formal dialogue, perhaps talks between the two countries’ scientists could help build understanding of, and confidence in, their strategic intentions.

## About the Authors

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## Notes

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