

China-India: Contours of a Conflict to Come

India's deployment of 50,000 additional troops to its Chinese border underlines wider and escalating bilateral tensions

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India has dispatched at least 50,000 additional troops to the Chinese border where there are currently 200,000 combat-ready troops, an increase of more than 40% since the two rival powers clashed in the Himalayas in June last year, resulting in the death of 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese.

India has also moved fighter jets to its northern border and the navy has sent warships along key sea lanes in the Indian Ocean to keep a watch over maritime trade to and from China. These moves have been made public at the same time as the Indian and US navies just conducted a joint exercise in the same ocean.

It all points to escalating tensions despite several rounds of talks aimed at de-escalating the situation. That's because India perceives China is consolidating control in border areas that once served as buffers through massive infrastructure building, including train lines in and out of Tibet and down to neighboring Nepal.

India has America firmly on its side as Washington seeks to ramp up multi-front pressure on Beijing's rising regional ambitions. To be sure, the US and India have a common interest in countering China, especially in the Indian Ocean. New Delhi has long seen the waterway as its sphere of influence but China has recently made inroads both to protect its trade and apply strategic pressure.

But a long history of US-India mistrust also runs deep, constraining their joint willingness and ability to develop a more robust, anti-China alliance. The Indians are particularly wary of Washington's long-time strategic relationship with their archenemy Pakistan, ties the Biden administration seems keen to revive as a strategic hedge to its withdrawal from Afghanistan.

At the same time, the US has expressed its displeasure with India's recent purchases of military hardware from its erstwhile ally Russia. India's US\$5.2 billion S-400 air defense

system deal with Russia has become a major point of friction between New Delhi and Washington.

But the two sides are making a show of military cooperation that clearly has China in its sights. On June 23 and 24, the USS Ronald Reagan, a Nimitz-class nuclear-powered supercarrier, along with its escorts and a fleet of F-18 fighter jets joined forces for exercises with Indian warships and Anglo-French Jaguar jet attack aircraft as well as Sukhoi-30MKI fighter jets, a Russian-developed plane produced under license in India.

The exercise was carried out south of Thiruvananthapuram (previously known as Trivandrum) on India's southwestern seaboard.

The drills went beyond basic exercises to include "advanced air defense exercises, cross-deck helicopter operations and anti-submarine exercises," according to a statement issued by the Indian Ministry of Defense. Needless to say, the only submarines that India and the US would be attacking in the Indian Ocean would be Chinese ones.

Most recently, the Chinese survey ship Xiang Yang Hong 03 has been carrying out a systematic survey in the eastern Indian Ocean. The data, nominally collected for scientific purposes, would also be relevant in any submarine warfare scenario.

Over the past few years, the Indians have noted that Chinese submarines have been spotted in the waters around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an Indian union territory located near the entrance to the Strait of Malacca, a maritime chokepoint through which as much as 80% of China's energy imports pass.

China's interest in the Indian Ocean is clearly motivated by its desire to protect its trade routes to the Middle East, Europe and Africa. But China's incursions with warships and submarines into a region where it has never been a power has put it on a collision course with India.

China has used anti-piracy deployments as a justification for expanding its naval presence in the Indian Ocean and making it more permanent by establishing its first military base abroad, in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa in 2017.

But even China's own 2015 Defense White Paper went much further than that by stating, "The traditional mentality that land overweighs sea must be abandoned and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests...[China will] participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power."

The situation in the Himalayas, where India and China are separated by a disputed border over which a full-scale war was fought in 1962, is increasingly volatile and could lead to more bloody confrontations between the two sides. But it is the Indian Ocean — with or without American participation — that is quickly becoming a front line in Asia's new Cold War.

David Scott, an associate member of the Corbett Center for Maritime Policy Studies, a United Kingdom-based think tank, concluded in an article for the US-based Center for International Maritime Security in September last year that:

"India's strategy for the Indian Ocean during the 2010s has been threefold: "building up its

naval-maritime infrastructure (based and support facilities), building up power projection assets, and strengthening relations with increasingly China-concerned powers.”

Those powers would be India’s allies in the Quadrilateral Security Dialog, also known as the Quad, a highly informal strategic forum between the US, Japan, India and Australia which has been widely viewed as a response to the rise of China as a regional power.

Originally initiated by then Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe in 2007, it fell apart when Australia withdrew a year later because its then-new prime minister Kevin Rudd did not want to upset relations with China, his country’s main trading partner.

The Quad remained dormant and was not revived until 2017 when four state leaders — all of them considered China hawks — met on the sidelines at an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Manila.

Although India and the US had conducted bilateral naval exercises since 1992, India achieved the status of a “Major Defense Partner” of the United States in 2016 and subsequently sent a flotilla of warships to join a US-Japan task force in the South China Sea.

India has also been an active participant in a series of exercises called Malabar, which have brought it closer together with the US, Japan and other regional allies.

In March 2020, Quad officials teleconferenced to discuss the Covid-19 pandemic and were joined for the first time by officials from New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam. Given rising regional tensions, it was clear that the health crisis was not the only item on the agenda.

China’s moves in the Indian Ocean haven’t been totally unexpected. As early as 2001, India established the Andaman and Nicobar Command, its first and only tri-service command, to safeguard India’s strategic interests in the waters east of its mainland and specifically to monitor China’s maritime movements.

Headquartered in Port Blair in the Andamans and Nicobars, it coordinates the activities of the navy, the army and the air force as well as the coast guards in the eastern Indian Ocean.

Apart from the strategically important facilities on the islands, India’s main naval bases are situated along its east and west coasts with stations also on Lakshadweep, a chain of islands north of Maldives.

The Indians are now also talking to the Australians about getting access to the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, an Australian possession in the Indian Ocean. India’s next step will be to build three nuclear-powered attack submarines and upgrade its own naval bases.

It is too early to say how successful all these moves will be in countering China’s designs in India’s traditional sphere of influence. But the battle lines have been drawn, from the heights of the Himalayas to the tropical waters of the Indian Ocean.



The 16th installment of the China navy escort fleet conducts a two-ship alongside replenishment in the eastern waters of the Indian Ocean in a file photo. Photo: Twitter

China may not be overly concerned whether its borders with India should be marked on one barren rock or another, but last year's confrontation in the Himalayas was more a show of force to keep India off balance.

As this week's Indian response shows, New Delhi is prepared to engage China militarily if perceived provocations continue along their Himalayan border.

China is responding in kind. In April, a commentator for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched a blistering attack on India and its friendship with the United States: "India has unfortunately become a victim of US selfishness...the benefits of US allies and partners attaching to the US anti-China chariot could get scarce."

In an even tougher attack on India, writers for the same Chinese paper claimed in May that India — not China — was to blame for the Covid-19 pandemic.

A May 1 post on the Chinese site Weibo from an account linked to the CCP showed an image of a rocket launch in China alongside a photo of bodies of virus victims being cremated in India with the text: "Lighting fire in China versus lighting fire in India."

The post was later deleted, but it reflected crudely the rising animosity between the two rival powers in a new Cold War that is only just beginning.

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