

## The Dragon and the Elephant: Chinese-Indian Relations in the 21st Century

Despite unresolved territorial disputes, mutual suspicions over each other's military buildup and strategic intent, potential economic competition, and the changing balance of power and realignments, China and India have enjoyed 10 years of mostly uninterrupted progress in their political, economic, and security relationship. President Hu Jintao's November 2006 visit to India, the first such visit by a Chinese head of state in a decade, marked an important milestone in the bilateral relationship. During Hu's visit, the two governments issued a joint statement highlighting a 10-point strategy to elevate the relationship and signed more than a dozen agreements to strengthen cooperation in trade, investment, energy, and cultural and educational exchanges.

Hu's visit to India injected optimism and high expectations for Chinese-Indian relations, but the challenges ahead remain daunting. They include unresolved territorial disputes, mutual suspicions of each other's intentions, and power realignments at the global and regional levels. The substance and consolidation of the bilateral relationship will depend on how the world's most populous and fastest-growing states manage these challenges as they continue their ascent to great-power status. Moreover, as the world becomes increasingly affected by the rise of these two Asian powers' phenomenal economic growth and political influence, how Beijing and New Delhi handle their bilateral relationship will be critical for regional and global peace and prosperity in the coming years.

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## Recovering from the Nuclear Tests

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**In the past, China tended to dismiss India as a peer competitor...**

After India carried out a series of underground nuclear tests in May 1998, Beijing was infuriated and deeply hurt, not as much by the tests themselves as by the justifications that New Delhi presented: that China's threat to India and its assistance to Pakistan's nuclear weapons programs compelled India to conduct the tests. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao said that

India had dealt "a hard blow on the international effort to prevent nuclear weapon proliferation. It will entail serious consequences to the peace and stability in South Asia and the world at large."<sup>1</sup>

Beijing categorically rejected New Delhi's assertion that direct Chinese threats or China's continuing nuclear and missile assistance to Islamabad had compelled India to go nuclear. Officials responded that, during the decade since Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's historical Decem-

ber 1988 visit to China, Chinese-Indian relations had improved. In 1993 and 1996, China and India signed two important agreements to reduce tensions and maintain peace along the line of actual control (LAC) in the long-disputed Himalayan border regions, pending a final resolution. In fact, People's Liberation Army Chief of Staff General Fu Quanyou had just visited India one month prior to the tests in an effort to improve the relationship between the two militaries.<sup>2</sup>

As a response to New Delhi's allegations and to demonstrate its credentials as a responsible power supporting global nonproliferation principles, Beijing used its rotating presidency of the UN Security Council to undertake a series of initiatives, including the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1172, condemning the nuclear tests in South Asia and calling on India and Pakistan to stop their nuclear programs immediately and refrain from weaponization.<sup>3</sup> China also cancelled the November 1998 Sino-Indian Joint Working Group (JWG) meeting in Beijing to express its displeasure.<sup>4</sup>

China's strong reaction and diplomatic campaigns to isolate New Delhi apparently induced the latter to seek rapprochement.<sup>5</sup> Indian policymakers publicly retracted their China-threat rhetoric. Brajesh Mishra, principal secretary to the Indian prime minister, stated in October 1998 that India did not see China as an enemy, nor did it desire an arms race with Beijing. In his meeting with Chinese ambassador to India Zhou Gang and former ambassador Cheng Ruisheng in January 1999, President K. R. Narayanan of India again emphasized that India and China did not view each other as a threat.<sup>6</sup> Beijing was receptive to New Delhi's retraction of the earlier China-threat rhetoric, and

the two sides agreed that the newly appointed Indian foreign minister, Jaswant Singh, would visit China in June 1999 to discuss a range of issues, including the initiation of a security dialogue. Singh arrived amidst the intensifying Indian-Pakistani Kargil crisis, which could well have escalated into a potentially military confrontation. China's neutral stance in the dispute gained much appreciation from India.<sup>7</sup>

After several other high-level visits, the JWG resumed its regular meetings in April 1999. In November 2001, Beijing and New Delhi for the first time exchanged maps on the middle sector of the disputed border area, covering the Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh boundaries with Tibet. At the suggestion of President Jiang Zemin and his counterpart Narayanan, a bilateral China-India Eminent Persons Group composed of former diplomats, scholars, scientists, and others from each country held its first meeting in New Delhi in September 2001. The group provides advice on how to improve bilateral relations and other issues.<sup>8</sup> The two countries have also initiated security dialogues, consultation on antiterrorism, and a vice-ministerial strategic dialogue.<sup>9</sup>

Defense Minister George Fernandes's weeklong visit to China in April 2003 held tremendous symbolic significance. His China trip was the first by an Indian defense minister in more than a decade. Moreover, just prior to the nuclear tests five years earlier, Fernandes had been allegedly misquoted as describing China as India's "security threat number one." Coming during the SARS crisis and the resulting cancellation of a number of international events scheduled in China, the visit was very much appreciated by his Chinese hosts.

Fernandes's trip paved the way for a more substantive June 2003 visit by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, during which Beijing and New Delhi forged a consensus on a wide range of bilateral, regional, and global issues.<sup>10</sup> They vowed not to view each other as security threats and reaffirmed their determination to resolve disputes through peaceful means. They also found converging interests in the development of a fair and equitable international political and economic order, the role of the United Nations, and global arms control processes, including efforts to prevent the weaponization of outer space.

Although no major breakthrough on the boundary issue was achieved during Vajpayee's visit—no such expectation had ever been entertained—each country appointed a special representative with a mandate to "explore ... the framework of a boundary settlement [and] to oversee the political frame-

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work of border negotiation.”<sup>11</sup> This step reflected their rationale that reaching the full potential of bilateral relations requires the ultimate and satisfactory resolution of this issue. China and India also made important gestures, though mostly symbolic, toward each other’s territory. New Delhi affirmed that the Tibetan Autonomous Region was part of the territory of China, and Beijing tacitly acknowledged that Sikkim was a state of India.

Finally, Vajpayee’s visit fostered bilateral trade, which had grown to \$7.6 billion annually by that year. A large entourage of Indian business executives accompanied the prime minister. Of Vajpayee’s three important speeches delivered during his visit, two were made at business venues, including one on potential Indian-Chinese cooperation in the information technology sector. The two countries designated Changgu in Sikkim and Renqinggang of the Tibetan Autonomous Region as the venues for border trade and agreed to use Nathu La as the pass for entry and exit to facilitate trade.<sup>12</sup> The two countries also actively explored the potential for regional economic cooperation, including the sub-regional Kunming Initiative, which aims to improve communication, travel, trade, and investment links among Bangladesh, Burma, China, and India.<sup>13</sup>

Two years later, during Premier Wen Jiabao’s April 2005 visit to India, the two governments issued a joint statement characterizing their relationship as a “strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity.”<sup>14</sup> Significant progress on border and trade cooperation was achieved. The two countries agreed to political parameters and guiding principles for the boundary dispute to facilitate an early resolution. Beijing and New Delhi also signed the Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement and set an ambitious bilateral trade target of \$40 billion for 2010.<sup>15</sup>

These high-level visits have produced marked results in several areas. Most noticeably, bilateral trade has grown from \$117 million in 1987 to \$25 billion in 2006.<sup>16</sup> In July 2006, the two countries reopened the historical Nathu La Pass, which had been closed since the 1962 war, to further promote cross-border trade.<sup>17</sup> India and China have also established a framework for frequent high-level exchanges among the defense ministries and armed forces; an annual defense dialogue; joint military exercises and/or training programs in the fields of search and rescue, antipiracy, and counterterrorism; and a mechanism for the exchange of officials for study tours and seminars.<sup>18</sup>

## **Sizing Up an Emerging India**

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Although Beijing and New Delhi have made major progress in their relationship, a number of issues remain unresolved, including the boundary disputes. India’s emergence as a major power has attracted growing attention from Chinese analysts as Beijing assesses the implications and formulates its India

policy in regional and global contexts. Whereas in the past China tended to dismiss India as a peer competitor, citing the many problems facing the country, such as poverty, poor infrastructure, and a sluggish bureaucracy, Beijing is now paying increasing attention to India's drive for great-power status through diplomatic initiatives and a military buildup.<sup>19</sup> Chinese analyses focus on four key developments: New Delhi's increasingly articulated assertiveness regionally and globally, its noticeable defense modernization, a growing U.S.-Indian nexus, and new regional initiatives.

Chinese analysts have recognized India's desire to be a great state ever since its independence, but Beijing has only recently taken note of India's actual emergence as a global power.<sup>20</sup> Chinese writers often quote Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru: "India, constituted as she is, cannot play a secondary part in the world. She will either count for a great deal or not count at all."<sup>21</sup> India emerged from the end of the Cold War as the unquestionable predominant power in South Asia, unsurpassed in the region by every indicator from military strength to economic power. Now, it is aspiring for global great-power status, as evident in its quest for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.<sup>22</sup> Chinese analysts argue that India is seeking to further consolidate its South Asian dominance and control of the Indian Ocean and to develop minimum but credible deterrence against China.<sup>23</sup>

These assets would give India greater confidence and allow it to disentangle itself from the conflict with Pakistan and to reach beyond the subcontinent, an essential step to move toward great-power status. New Delhi's active diplomacy in recent years has sought to extend its presence and reach out to new partners in Southeast Asia and Central Asia and to major world powers. This strategy confirms a new Indian foreign policy no longer held back by the regional fixation of the past but more driven by a desire for a place on the global stage. Implicit in this strategy is also the need to balance China's influence.<sup>24</sup>

Although India's overall level of economic development lags behind that of China, it has made significant advances, namely in high-technology industries. Growing rapidly since New Delhi introduced economic reforms in the mid-1990s, India is aiming to become the fourth- or fifth-largest economy in the world by 2020.<sup>25</sup> Currently ranked among the world's top 10 countries, India's economy is projected to claim the number three spot by 2050.<sup>26</sup> This could be a major challenge for China in terms of India being an attractive destination for foreign direct investment, competing for energy and markets, and providing an alternative model of economic development. Economic power would also provide India with greater political influence and military capabilities.

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Chinese analysts also observe a comprehensive defense modernization drive on India's part. From \$13.9 billion for 2000–2001, a 28 percent increase over the previous fiscal year in its own right, India's defense budget has grown to more than \$21 billion for 2007–2008.<sup>27</sup> New Delhi is engaging in foreign acquisitions and indigenous procurement in power-projection capabilities, with a focus on modernizing strategic forces, including 100 nuclear-capable medium-

range ballistic missiles and short-range surface-to-surface missiles.<sup>28</sup> India has also launched a major naval buildup in recent years, acquiring key naval platforms from Russia. Its navy currently ranks seventh in the world in size, and it is the only country in South Asia and one of nine in the world to possess an aircraft carrier.<sup>29</sup>

Chinese analysts see India's defense modernization as driven by its desire to be recognized as a major power, with all the nuclear and military trappings of prestige and recognition; its deter-

mination to maintain dominance of the Indian Ocean as well as its ambition to go beyond; and its aspiration for the ability to counter China bilaterally and in the context of a military conflict with Pakistan, given Beijing's likely support of Islamabad. These developments have important implications for China. India already maintains conventional force superiority along the Chinese-Indian border. India's ability to develop and deploy long-range missiles and its growing nuclear capability would erode Chinese deterrence as more and more major Chinese cities and key political and economic centers could fall within their range.<sup>30</sup>

China is paying special attention to the budding U.S.-Indian relationship, which Beijing perceives as Washington's attempt to enlist New Delhi as a potential counterweight, if not part of a containment strategy, against China. The United States clearly recognizes India's potential as a major political player and an emerging market, its crucial role in South Asia's stability, and its potential as a counter against China. Within this context, growing military ties, including U.S. military sales to India, joint military exercises, and regular defense consultation, are of particular concern to China.<sup>31</sup>

Notably, the warming of U.S.-Indian relations took place at a time when Chinese-U.S. relations were experiencing serious setbacks in the late 1990s. In 1999, NATO bombed the Chinese embassy in the former Yugoslavia, touching off a wave of anti-American sentiment in China. In May of that year, the Cox Report charged China with nuclear espionage and accused Beijing of proliferation activities, further escalating disputes between the two countries.<sup>32</sup> The Bush administration's pro-Taiwan policy and perceived hostile attitude

**A stable bilateral relationship will require effectively managing relations with Pakistan.**

toward China further exacerbated the tensions in early 2001.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, Washington and New Delhi were drawing closer than ever before to each other, engaging in regular high-level visits and briefings on major policy initiatives. New Delhi, in return, openly endorsed U.S. missile defense positions even when many U.S. allies were concerned with the strategic implications of Washington's decisions.<sup>34</sup>

The U.S.-Indian nuclear deal of March 2006 is yet another indication of a growing Washington–New Delhi nexus. At the summit in New Delhi, President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made the surprising announcement that the United States and India had reached an agreement on nuclear cooperation. After India agreed to separate its civilian and military nuclear programs and pledged to open 14 of its 22 nuclear power reactors currently running to international inspection, the Bush administration began seeking to amend existing U.S. nonproliferation legislation and to modify the restrictions of the Nuclear Suppliers Group regarding nuclear exports to states that are not signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, thus facilitating civilian nuclear transfers. Although Beijing's official reactions were rather muted, some Chinese commentators took issue with Washington's double standards in its nonproliferation policy, preventing Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs while facilitating one for India, and the potentially far-reaching impact of the deal on global efforts to combat the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, India has also launched a flurry of post–nuclear test diplomacy, engaging countries beyond its traditional sphere of influence. High-level Indian and Japanese officials have traded visits several times since 2000,<sup>36</sup> and the two countries have now established the Japan-India Strategic and Global Partnership.<sup>37</sup> India has also broadened its relationships with the member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), many of whom have ongoing disputes with China,<sup>38</sup> and improved relations with Myanmar and Vietnam.<sup>39</sup> New Delhi's Southeast Asia diplomacy could complicate Chinese-ASEAN relations. Growing Indian and ASEAN naval cooperation could impinge on China's maritime interests, making a final resolution of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea even more difficult. Indian-Vietnamese defense cooperation is also viewed with suspicion given China's unresolved territorial issues with each country.<sup>40</sup>

## The Challenges Ahead

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Although Chinese-Indian relations have achieved major progress over the last decade, obstacles to future development remain. Unresolved territorial disputes, mutual suspicions, and growing rivalry in the areas of energy, regional

**The nuclear deal is yet another indication of a growing Washington–New Delhi nexus.**

influence, and realignment of great-power relations, if not managed well, could deny the two rising Asian giants the opportunity to cooperate and realize their potentials as the engines of growth and pillars of stability in Asia and beyond. Given these considerations, sustained efforts at the highest political level will

be required to translate many of the blueprints for progress into reality. China and India must navigate a number of obstacles, including the intractable territorial dispute, mutual suspicions and the potential for rivalry, China's relationship with Pakistan, and ultimately the emerging China–India–United States strategic triangle.<sup>41</sup>

Despite a generally benign atmosphere between the two countries, lingering suspicion and distrust remain over the 1962 Himalayan border war. Just prior to Hu's visit, Chinese ambassador to India Sun Yuxi asserted Beijing's claim to the entire Arunachal Pradesh area, generating unease on both sides of the border.<sup>42</sup> Considering the two Asian giants' upward trajectory in economic and military power, both are sensitive about their respective spheres of influence. Regular strategic dialogues at high levels will be required to prevent conflicts.<sup>43</sup> Although 10 rounds of talks between the special representatives have been held, no breakthrough has been achieved.<sup>44</sup> A final resolution will require not only political concessions by both capitals but also the skill to sell a plan to their domestic constituencies.

A stable Chinese-Indian relationship will also require effective management of the delicate China-India-Pakistan triangle.<sup>45</sup> Chinese-Pakistani ties, particularly in the areas of security and defense, remain a serious concern to India. New Delhi has accused Beijing of providing Islamabad with nuclear and missile assistance, while Beijing has made greater efforts to address New Delhi's legitimate concerns over China's defense ties with Pakistan. China hoped that its neutrality during the 1999 Indian-Pakistani Kargil crisis demonstrated a more balanced Chinese South Asia policy. That gesture has not yet translated into confidence on India's part that the Chinese-Pakistani relationship is not targeted at India. Beijing could use its strong ties with Islamabad to facilitate diplomatic reconciliation more actively between Islamabad and New Delhi. China's reputed influence on Pakistan, however, is by no means certain. As the post-September 11 antiterrorist campaigns have demonstrated, there might be constraints between the two erstwhile allies.<sup>46</sup>

China's relationship with Pakistan is at a critical juncture. Continued support of Islamabad remains a key element of Beijing's South Asian policy.<sup>47</sup>

Some have suggested that China's military-industrial factions might want to seize the opportunity to strengthen relations with Pakistan, including renewed sales of missiles and nuclear equipment. Yet, Beijing does not want its relations with Islamabad to scuttle the process of normalization with New Delhi or, worse, want to be dragged into the middle of a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan.<sup>48</sup> China's neutrality during the Kargil conflict in 1999 clearly reflected this consideration.<sup>49</sup>

Within this context, China's support of Pakistan in recent years has more to do with the concern of Pakistan falling apart than with Pakistan's value as a strategic counterweight to India. Beijing has urged Washington and New Delhi to adopt a more balanced South Asia policy and not to push Islamabad toward actions that might bring down the Pakistani government of General Pervez Musharraf. China wants to see a moderate Pakistani government that can help stem Islamic fundamentalist support of separatist movements in the Xinjiang region.<sup>50</sup> Beijing's support of Musharraf arguably lies partly in a desire to maintain stability in that country against the backdrop of rising Islamic fundamentalism. Moreover, China is also likely interested in keeping Islamabad under its influence at a time of encroaching U.S. regional presence rather than in encouraging Pakistan to embark on reckless adventures.<sup>51</sup> The last thing China wants is a military confrontation in South Asia.

Within a volatile security environment and what many consider an emerging strategic triangle, China, India, and the United States are acutely aware of policies adopted by each other and how those decisions may affect their own interests. Washington and New Delhi share normative values such as democracy and strategic interests such as terrorism while Beijing's ties with both are more driven by contingent rather than structural interests.<sup>52</sup> The United States seeks to align with a major democracy in a part of the world that is becoming increasingly important for its global strategic interests: terrorism, energy security, and a rising China. India looks at its growing ties as an important gateway to great-power status; in the nuclear arena, these ties also grant New Delhi legitimacy and recognition. Yet, it is wary of being seen in a role of countering China.

Prior to the September 11 attacks, China was becoming increasingly concerned that the new ties between Washington and New Delhi could have negative security implications for China, especially considering the growing defense and space cooperation between the two.<sup>53</sup> Washington's post-September 11 focus on global terrorism, including a renewed engagement of Pakistan and an emphasis on cooperation among the great powers, has reduced Beijing's worries about a U.S.-Indian entente against China. Nonetheless, the longer-term implications of regional and global alignment and realignment for each of these players are not yet clear.<sup>54</sup>

## The Way Forward

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Hu's visit to India in November 2006 was a major milestone in Chinese-Indian relations. To fully realize the potential between Asia's two great powers, they must at a minimum avoid conflicts that could arise from apprehension, misperception, misunderstanding, or miscalculation. Leaders in Beijing and New Delhi are content with the current status of bilateral relations because they are stable and provide possibilities for future progress. Nonetheless, passivity can only move bilateral relations so far.

**Washington's post-9/11 focus has reduced Beijing's worries about a U.S.-Indian entente.**

Beijing and New Delhi need to address their threat perceptions through greater communication, confidence building, and institutionalized conflict-management mechanisms. China's and India's growing economies and modernizing militaries do not need to be seen as aimed at each other or in zero-sum terms. Greater engagement in dialogue on strategic intents could go a long way in heading off suspicion and hostility. The two countries should seek to promote common interests through the emerging

China-India-United States triangle rather than using their respective bilateral ties with the world's only superpower to undermine the other's security interests. They can also use this communication to foster mutual interests, such as a fair and equitable international political and economic order, nonintervention, environment, disarmament, and antiterrorism in the international community.

China and India should work to capitalize on the potential of bilateral trade and technology cooperation, especially because both countries are now members of the World Trade Organization. With 40 percent of the world's population between the two countries, plenty of opportunities exist, but strong leadership and business initiatives remain lacking.<sup>55</sup> Chinese-Indian bilateral trade stands at \$25 billion annually, a quantum improvement over the last decade, yet there remain significant obstacles to trade and investments, and the prospect of a free-trade agreement still seems out of reach.

Both should be sensitive to the issues of greatest importance to each. China should make every effort to dispel India's misgivings about alleged Chinese assistance to Pakistan's weapons programs. China's ongoing dialogue with the Dalai Lama's representatives should be welcomed as both a good sign and worthy efforts that would defuse tension over Tibet. The two countries must also set a clearly defined timetable for resolving the border dispute. The existing LAC, with minor adjustments, should be the basis for negotiating the international boundary. The 1962 war was unfortunate and occurred because of

miscalculation, misjudgment, and, most of all, lost opportunities to resolve the issue. It has taken more than 45 years to rebuild the bilateral relationship to its current status. Neither China nor India can wait another 45 years to bring that to closure.

Clearly, China can no longer ignore India as a subcontinental giant on the rise.<sup>56</sup> Beijing is rather sanguine that India cannot challenge China's fundamental interests in the near term. Chinese analysts have moved away from the alarmist commentaries in the immediate aftermath of the nuclear tests to more balanced assessments of India's capabilities and interests. The two emerging Asian powers will undoubtedly have differences over a range of issues, but conflicts do not have to be inevitable if they continue regular high-level visits and official consultation, trade ties, and cooperation on international and regional issues and foster their strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and stability. Proper management by both states can ensure stability for bilateral relations, South Asian security, and the evolving global balance of power.

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