OPEN ACCESS
The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies
Vol. 2, No. 2 (July 2021) 2140003 (21 pages)

DOI: 10.1142/S2717541321400039

India's China Challenge: Foreign Policy Dilemmas Post-Galwan and Post-Covid

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The paper analyzes the challenge to India from China, and the dilemmas faced by India in shaping an appropriate response. A two-level theory analysis indicates that some diminishing cooperation is possible at the global level, for example over environmental issues. However, regionally, this has been overtaken structurally by increasing sharp confrontation along the Himalayas and by rising geopolitical and geo-economic competition across Asia and the Indo-Pacific. This has been overlaid in 2020–2021 by the particularly negative effect on Indian relations with China of the clashes and casualties at Galwan and the impact of Covid-19. Given this sharpening challenge, the paper finds that India's cherished axiom of full strategic autonomy now has to be tempered in its response by balancing dictates, particularly in the light of Stephen Walt's balance of threat model. India's responses pose various dilemmas in terms of effectiveness and counter-productiveness. Geopolitically, dilemmas continue to revolve for India around how far to invoke a Tibet Card and a Taiwan Card in its One China policy; and how far India can shape an immediate web (in effect around China) through strengthening security links with Vietnam, Mongolia and South Korea. Dilemmas also follow from how far India should pursue tighter security/military arrangements with more powerful China-concerned states like Australia, Japan, France, and above all, the United States. Geo-economically, India's dilemmas revolve around how to respond to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and to China's Maritime Silk Road scheme. Looking forward, an important factor will be how far India pulls away from Covid-19 disruption to the economy, and how far it will need to divert long-term economic funding away from immediate short-term military projects.

KEYWORDS: India; China; foreign policy; dilemmas; threats.

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Introduction

Let us start with a stark political fact. Because China poses increasingly sharp militarily and economic challenges to India, responding to this China's challenge is the biggest issue for Indian foreign policy. Since the challenge from China is geopolitical and geo-economic, the response by India is also geopolitical and geo-economic. Events in 2020 have heightened China's challenge to India; namely confrontation (and casualties) along the Himalayas at Galwan, which overlapped with the eruption of Covid-19 in China, which went on to hit India more heavily in 2021. By mid-2021, the post-Covid era had already started for China, but not yet for India.

Consequently, this paper considers how for India: (1) China's challenge is increasingly seen as a threat; (2) conceptual puzzles around security dilemma theory and two-level analysis; (3) the relationship between internal and external balancing; (4) "One China" policy concerning Tibet and Taiwan; (5) land partnerships with Vietnam, Mongolia, and South Korea; (6) wider maritime partnerships with the US, Japan, Australia, and France; (7) selective regionalism; (8) counter-infrastructure opportunities; and (9) how Covid-19 exacerbates and increases these existing dilemmas for Indian foreign policy.

From Challenge to Threat

China's challenge for India is partly militarily and partly economic. China poses an 'immediate' geographic and geopolitical challenge around India. This is manifested in particular through China's reinforcement of its land position along the disputed Himalayas, its tightening military alliance with Pakistan which poses India with the dangers of fighting a "two-front collusive war" (Khanna, 2020; Singh, 2021), China's increasing presence in Sri Lankan ports like Hambantota and more recently the Colombo Port City project, and China's increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean. China also poses an increasing economic challenge to India. Domestically there is India's worsening trade deficit with China. Externally, there is China's Maritime Silk Road penetration of the Indian Ocean and South Asia, and position of advantage in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Covid-19 has differentially affected the two countries and economically in China's favor.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry, and of course its official state media, continues to stress win-win cooperation with India, or rather the potential for that. With regard to the Wuhan Spirit generated in the personal summit between Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping in April 2018, this proved "shallow and transitory"; and was already

"dissipating" (Ramachandran, 2019) by the time of their Chennai Connect summit in October 2019. The casualties and extended confrontation at Galwan in 2020 was a further nail in the coffin for China's image in India. India's External Affairs Minister reckoned that the confrontations and casualties in Ladakh "profoundly disturbed the relationship" through its damaging "impact on both public and political opinion in this country" (Jaishankar, 2021a). Xi Jinping's personal letter of condolence over Covid-19's impact on India (rather vague, and perhaps for the record, with vague offers of Chinese assistance) seems to have been, in effect, consigned to the dustbin both by India's Ministry for External Affairs and by Modi.

Of course, challenge is a relative modest word. What India needs to determine is whether this "challenge" is a "threat" to India. George Fernandes, the then Defence Minister, had been blunt in a TV interview in 1998 that "China, not Pakistan is threat no. 1" (Hindustan Times, 1998); but generally India's Ministry for External Affairs and its Ministry of Defence has continued to be reluctant to use the word "threat" in relation to China. Nevertheless, cutting through the official fog and diplomatic niceties, some Indian analysts argue post-Doklam and post-Galwan that "China is an implacable enemy of India and pretending otherwise is strategic myopia" (Kapila, 2020). All this reflects India's interpretive dilemma over how should it interpret Chinese intentions and the motives behind its actions? Has international relations (IR) theory got anything to offer?

Theory Puzzles

Classic *security dilemma* theory (Jervis, 1976), if applied, would suggest that a Chinese defensive military build up is being misinterpreted by India as offensive in intent. Reflecting this particular model, India then is building up its own military response (also defensively), which in turn China considers as offensive, and so a *zero sum* downward and escalatory spiral sets in. However, China's preceding and initiatory land push along the Himalayas and its maritime push through the South China Sea into the Indian Ocean can quite reasonably be interpreted by India as intended and offensive (rather than defensive) — particularly under Xi Jinping's more robust and assertive foreign policy re-positioning (Raghavan, 2019). *Cascading* security dilemma theory, where Chinese military actions are not aimed at India but are responses to China's competition elsewhere with the US, is initially attractive with regard to nuclear escalation (Basrur, 2019, p. 228). On further inspection, it is unconvincing for explaining the continuing, wider and sharpening wider range of India–China issues. Here, it remains clear that Chinese actions along the Himalayas, its nexus with

Pakistan, and its increasing maritime presence in the Indian Ocean are not particularly responses to the US and do present an increasing threat to India.

Instead, Stephen Walt's *balance of threat* theory indicates a clear need for India to balance; reflecting his fourfold threat criteria of China's aggregate power, military power, geographic proximity, and perceived offensive intentions (Walt, 1987, pp. 22–26). This does not mean that India can necessarily swing into formal hard Cold War style containment alliances with the US against China, but it does suggest the need for India to pursue some balancing against China.

Two-level analysis remains pertinent for Indian foreign policy. At the global level, there remain some potential areas of continuing Indian cooperation with China, for example over the environment and general development issues. Nevertheless, the current trajectory of Xi's China is that for India the global avenues for such engagement are becoming less present. Instead, at the regional level, i.e., the Indo-Pacific and Asia, confrontation and competition are all too evident. It is at the regional level where balancing is increasingly being pursued by India *vis-à-vis* China.

Internal and External Balancing

Balancing can take two forms; namely *internal balancing* through building up one's own military strength and *external balancing* through building up external security partnerships (Waltz, 1979, p. 118).

India is pursuing internal balancing against China in two areas, along the Himalayas and on the maritime front. Along the Himalayas this has already involved reactivation of high altitude airfields and deployment of advanced fighter planes, giving India some local edge. India's purchase of Rafale strike planes reflects growing security cooperation with France. On the army front this has involved (1) extending infrastructure road links up to the disputed border, and (2) creation of the Panagarh-based mountain strike 17 Corps specifically designed for China operations along the Himalayas. Post-Galwan, India moved to restructure its four cross-border strike forces in 2021. Previously, I, II, and 21 corps were facing Pakistan, while 17 corps were facing China. Now, 1 Corp is being redeployed for the Northern Sector (Ladakh), facing China, but thereby weakening Indian forces deployable against Pakistan. A new division is being created for the Central Sector (Himachal Pradesh) facing China, but with uncertainty over where they might be pulled from. The 17 Corps is set to be enlarged and concentrating on the Eastern Sector (Arunachal Pradesh) facing China. There remains some uncertainty over India's ability, in these Covid-19 times, to fund and implement such an enlargement.

On maritime front, India is also seeking to internally balance against China. On the one hand, the Indian navy has clearly been deploying more actively and widely across the Indian Ocean and into South China Sea, and has established wider bases and facilities around the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, its assets have lagged behind China's accelerating naval programme, particularly in the areas of submarines and aircraft carriers. In part the limitations of India's own indigenous production are making India to turn to external suppliers, where France has become important for India's submarine programme, and South Korea's maritime building prowess may be something for India to benefit from.

Nevertheless, India's own indigenous military programme continues to lag behind China's, while China's larger economy and quicker rebound from Covid-19 has given it larger spending increases *vis-à-vis* India. Thus, while India's internal balancing is necessary, it is not sufficient. Internal balancing needs to be complemented by external balancing (Lal, 2020). India's external balancing towards China can be seen in possible revision of its One China Policy, its selective partnerships on land and in the wider maritime stretches, its selective regionalism and its counter-infrastructure initiatives.

One China Policy (Tibet and Taiwan)

A basic political dilemma is whether India should revise its One China policy, established in 1949 when India quickly transferred recognition from the Republic of China (ROC) that was clinging onto power in Taiwan, to the People's Republic of China (PRC) that was taking power on the Chinese mainland; and went on to recognize the PRC move back into Tibet in 1950. However, in the wake of Galwan, some in India have argued that the One China Policy now needs "rethinking" (Chaudhury, 2020; Kakar, 2020) with regard to Tibet (Dutta, 2020) and to Taiwan.

India faces a continuing "dilemma" (Chari, 2020) over how far, if at all, to try and reverse the position by Jawaharlal Nehru when he failed to maintain "British India" forward privileges in Tibet. Confrontations in Ladakh increased calls for India to play a *Tibet Card* (Rajagopalan, 2020c; Gupta, 2020a) against China, though some worry that playing any Tibet Card would be "more provocative than productive" (Ramachandran, 2020). Certainly, the Chinese state media continues to warn India against playing any Tibet card. The counterargument is that China would not be seeking to dissuade India, unless it was worried that India's Tibet Card was an effective stance against China? A geopolitical Great Game is operating in the Buddhist Himalayas between India and China (Stobdan, 2019).

Open Indian support for Tibetan independence is probably too late, given that the Joint Declaration signed by the Vajpayee government in 2003 specifically recognized that the "Tibetan Autonomous Region is part of the territory of the PRC" (India–China, 2003); a position also registered in the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between Tibetan Region of China and India (India–China, 1954) signed by the Nehru government in 1954. It is also unnecessary since the Tibetan leadership has dropped demands for independence to concentrate on substantive and genuine autonomy unnecessary. Here, India makes little comment on the internal conditions in Tibet, but it could at least join in with calls for genuine autonomy, rather than acquiesce in its opposite (absorption and centralization) in play in the so-called Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) set up by China. Human rights abuses by China in Tibet could also be picked up by India. The 2003 Joint Declaration may have included the Indian agreement that "it does not allow Tibetans to engage in anti-China political activities in India" (India–China, 2003), but that could be revisited? Official contacts, and support, with the India-based central Tibetan Administration (CTA), based in Dharamshala could be reinvigorated. A further Tibetan asset is in India deploying units of the Special Frontier Force (SFF), along the Himalayan front against China. The SFF recruited from ethnic Tibetans was previously only deployed on the front against Pakistan, but was deployed against China on the Ladakh front for the first time in September 2020.

Finally, the present Dalai Lama could also be given more official contact and space with the Indian administration, a so-called *Dalai Lama Card* (Singh, 2017). Looking forward, India could be prepared to step forward on the death of the Dalai Lama, so as to facilitate (and recognize) the emergence of the next Dalai Lama from Indian soil. This has been widely mooted in Tibetan circles; with Tawang, a major Tibetan Buddhist center in Arunachal Pradesh or the newly set up Tibetan Buddhist-majority Union Territory of Ladakh being areas where India could provide protective cover.

With regard to Taiwan, the calls for India to play a *Taiwan Card* have also grown louder (Rajagopalan, 2020b; ToI, 2021b). India was the first state to give diplomatic recognition to the PRC, with Taiwan (the ROC) previously asserting that like Beijing they did not recognize the legality of the McMahon Line. Nevertheless, there is strategic convergence between India and Taiwan, with India identified as an important piece in Taiwan's Go South policy, which some Indian analysts see as a geopolitical match for India's Act East policy (Shah, 2018). This would involve India not in transferring recognition back to the ROC as based in Taiwan, but rather in increasing the official recognition and cooperation with Taiwan as an independent actor (if not state), reflecting

unstated shared imperatives of balancing China. Increased trade links with Taiwan is a feasible development. The 2013 Investment Agreement was followed up in Autumn 2020 with consideration of pursuing a trade agreement, and rising Chinese warnings about India playing a *Taiwan Card* against China through increased trade links and agreements. The counter-argument is simple in India: "we should definitely consider in elevating our ties with Taiwan" for admittedly "Beijing is certainly sensitive about Taiwan", but "if it is not going to respect India's sensitivities [anyway], there is no reason why New Delhi should be unduly deferential towards Beijing's interests" (Ghosh, 2020). In an already deteriorating situation, India has little to lose? Further modest room for maneuver is with regard to defence cooperation (Vanvari and Tan, 2021). Politically, India could more actively support Taiwan's international participation in UN agencies like the World Health Organization, of which India is the chair for 2020–2022.

Asian Land Partners (Vietnam, Mongolia and South Korea)

India has developed strategic partnerships with China's immediate neighborhood countries: Vietnam, Mongolia and South Korea. A Chinese logic is implicitly involved though officially unstated.

India–Vietnam relationship continues to strengthen from the Defence Protocol signed in 2000, the *Arc of Advantage* mooted in 2003, and the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership announced in 2016. Post-Galwan, the *Joint Vision* agreed by the two leaderships in December 2020 did not mention China by name; yet tacitly reflected that factor as they reiterated their shared Buddhist heritage, welcomed India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, called for a free and open Indo-Pacific, and reiterated the important freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and observance of UNCLOS rules in the South China Sea (India–Vietnam, 2020; Solanki, 2021). Mutual logistic support and increased joint exercise were announced for the future.

India could continue further energy cooperation with Vietnam in South China Sea energy fields. Already the involvement of ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL) involvement of CNG in oil bock-28 field since 2006 has been a friction point with China, with the Indian navy in turn talking of readiness to defend Indian interests in such fields, and the latest 2-year extension taking India through to September 2021. China continues to warn India against such defence and energy cooperation in the South China Sea. However, the fact that China is concerned about India–Vietnam strategic cooperation is perhaps one very good reason for India to be pursuing it? India has faced the

dilemma of potential overstretching of operations in the South China Sea (Kondapalli, 2019). However, increased defence cooperation with Vietnam, with mutual logistics support under discussion, would open up extended berthing rights at Cam Ranh Bay, which would in turn allow the Indian navy to compensate for its distance away from such energy fields.

Mongolia, a land neighbor of China, and keen to avoid re-absorption into a greater China, presents opportunities for India. Defence cooperation has been established (India–Mongolia, 2019), with Chinese discomfort evident. From India's point of view, the logic is clear "India–Mongolia cooperation signals that India can play the geopolitical game in China's backyard" (ToI, 2017).

India has also developed closer partnerships with South Korea, primarily on the economic front; where South Korea is now trying to avoid economic dependency on China through its New Southern Policy (Kumar, 2018), and is showing gradually rising concerns over China's push into the East China Sea. South Korea's shipbuilding strength may help India in its internal balancing strengthening of the navy. Defence and security cooperation, including naval exercising in the Indian Ocean and reiteration of freedom of navigation, have been taking place since 2018. Meanwhile, growing defence cooperation between India and South Korea is something that China has expressed concerns over (Ma, 2019; also Chaudhury, 2019). Maritime cooperation defence issues featured in India-South Korea defence minister talks in March 2021.

Maritime Constrainment (Australia, France, Japan and the US)

India has also moved to establish wider partnerships, tacitly China-related, with various maritime powers across the Indo-Pacific. This has dovetailed in with India's own increasing naval outreach, most recently illustrated with the dispatch of a four-ship task force to South-East Asia, the South China Sea, and the Western Pacific in August 2021 for a two-month deployment, including *Malabar 2021* exercising off Guam with fellow Quad navies. This was the most powerful Indian naval deployment eastwards ever consisting of the Guided Missile Destroyer INS Ranvijay, the Guided Missile Frigate INS Shivalik, the Anti-Submarine Corvette INS Kadmatt, and the Guided Missile Corvette INS Kora. Its very deliberate cooperation and exercising with the Australian, French, Japanese, Singaporean, South Korean, and US navies was matched by no similar interaction with the Chinese navy. Here, a simple operational development is how across the Indo-Pacific, Logistics Cooperation Agreements (LCAs) have been signed by India with the US in 2016, Singapore and France in 2018, South Korea in 2019, Japan and Australia in 2020.

India's security outreach to the US represents the single most important move that India can make to redress its relative military disadvantage *vis-à-vis* China. Their mutual concerns over China have driven their strategic convergence. India's security partnership with the US continues to slowly but surely strengthen. Post-Galwan, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) signed in October 2020 completes the four foundational agreements needed for effective close military cooperation.

Parallel strategic cooperation had been developed with Japan and Australia in the Indo-Pacific and France in the Indian Ocean. In the case of France significant military equipment has been forthcoming, Rafales for the airforce and Scorpene submarines for the navy, with an order for nuclear attack submarines imminent. Military exercising in the Indian Ocean has become particularly well established. India's relationship with Japan is particularly important, not just in terms of security (political and military) but also in terms of economic cooperation. Their economic cooperation has involved important Japanese infrastructure investment on the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, which are increasingly important for India's naval grip on the Bay of Bengal and Strait of Malacca.

Minilaterals are another option for India in reducing dependency on the United States and increasing security *vis-à-vis* China. Consequently, India has moved into the India-Japan-US (IJUS) trilateral, the Australia–India–Japan–US quadrilateral (the so-called "Quad"), and the Australia-France-India (AFI) trilateral mechanism. These are generating military underpinnings. Trilateral IJUS military exercising has been running since 2017. Post-Galwan, Indian dropped its opposition to Australia joining the trilateral IJUS format with subsequent quadrilateral four-navy exercises carried out in the Bay of Bengal in September 2020 and in the Western Pacific in August 2021. Similarly post-Galwan, India was also happy to participate in five-way military exercising with Australia, France, Japan, and the US in the Bay of Bengal in November 2020, a "Quad-Plus" format already seen in 2019.

Admittedly, India has been involved in the Russia–India–China (RIC) trilateral since 2001, but RIC has developed little traction (Rajagopalan, 2020a). It has not involved fostered, or involved itself in any Indo-Pacific cooperation between India and China, nor has it addressed India–China differences. India has also been involved in the Brazil–Russia–India–China–South Africa (BRICS) format since 2010, but like the RIC, the BRICS format has not fostered, or involved itself in any Indo-Pacific cooperation between India and China, nor has it addressed India-China differences. Meanwhile, India has pursued security cooperation with Brazil and India through the India–Brazil–South Africa (IBSA) mechanism, running since 2006, which has

developed useful maritime cooperation in the south Atlantic and south-west Indian Ocean that does not involve China.

Such developments represent tacit but effective external balancing, although the need for such external support represents some modification of India's axiom of unfettered "strategic autonomy" (Snedden, 2020). Nevertheless, as Markey recently argued "India's vulnerabilities leave no choice but partnership" with other China-concerned states; within which "only New Delhi's embrace of external balancing, especially through the Quad, seems like a more sustainable strategy" (Markey, 2021). The dilemma for India is that such external balancing may trigger further Chinese actions. Veiled Chinese threats that India should distance itself from the Quad perhaps suggest that external balancing and Quad cooperation is precisely the policy needed from India.

Selective Regionalism

Indian foreign policy has pursued a policy of selective regionalism to constrain China's push for presence and influence.

First in organizations that are Indian-led, like the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), India has not only blocked Pakistan's entry, which would be one entry point for China, but it has also blocked China's membership and any observer status. Similarly, India has increasingly shaped the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) mechanism as a better vehicle for sub-regional cooperation than SAARC (South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation). In part this is because BIMSTEC is a useful bridge to South-East Asia, given than Myanmar and Thailand are members (as well as India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan). The reasons are also partly China-related; as BIMSTEC does not, unlike SAARC, contain Pakistan as a member, nor China as member or observer (Induja, 2021).

India has also set up sub-regional frameworks in some competition to China. The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) involves India, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. India's own Look-East connectivity projects fall within its focus. This was set up in 2000. China in contrast, and competition set up the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation format in 2016 bringing together China with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand. Conversely, China's Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) established in 2000 has been matched by the India–Africa Forum Summit (IAFS), established in 2008. Similarly China's outreach in the South Pacific to the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Leaders

Forum (CPIC-EDCLF), established in 2006, has been matched by India's Forum for India-Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC) set up in 2014. Both China and India gained observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013.

Indian foreign policy has also joined some Chinese regional initiatives, as a way to reduce China's otherwise monopolistic powers accruing. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has an Indian Vice-President, even though it is headquartered in Beijing, and has a Chinese President Jin Liqun who was a minister in the Chinese government. Moreover, the AIIB kept lending to India during the 2020 border confrontation at Galwan. India's joining of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), headquartered in Shanghai and bringing together Russia and China with the various Central Asian States, can be seen as a way of ensuring that Pakistan (also joining) is not given further support, but also that China's ability to steer the SCO is diluted.

Finally, India has also avoided various Chinese regional initiatives. This was on show with India's decision over the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) initiative. Although negotiations for entry into the RCEP were pursued during the 2010s, India finally decided to pull out of its final stages in November 2019. In essence India was worried that the country would be flooded by cheap goods, and that RCEP was too China-dominated, operating in effect as a "China club" (Gupta, 2020b). Despite this late Indian withdrawal, RCEP was initiated in December 2020, leaving India out of the regional bloc covering East Asia, South-East Asia and Australasia. Indian observers immediately wondered if the RCEP was China's gain and India's loss (Panda, 2020c). India instead favors bilateral-free trade agreements over such a "China-led" RCEP (Jayaswal and Laskar, 2020). India now faces the danger of being left out of emerging regional frameworks, but could sidestep that by seeking admission to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), that involves countries like Canada, Japan, Australia, and Vietnam (and which the US is likely to rejoin under Biden). This has the advantage of not involving China, but still means India's getting over its own protectionism.

Counter-Infrastructure Initiatives

One important "dilemma" faced by India is how to respond to China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR), pushed by Beijing since 2013. Most states in Southeast Asia and across the Indian Ocean enthusiastically supported it (Sakhuja, 2014). India's response has been two-fold, rejection and counter-proposals.

First on participation, India followed a period of avoidance by coming down against the initiative. This was shown at the Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in

April 2019, which India joined the US in boycotting. India's grounds were that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), linking the overland Eurasian Silk Road belt and the Indian Ocean Maritime Silk Road (MSR), ran through disputed territory in Kashmir claimed by India and administered by Pakistan. Unofficially, India has wider doubts about the MSR being in effect a *string of pearls* (a term first coined in the US in the 1990s) encirclement strategy by China; "old string with new pearls" as one Indian commentator put it (Suri, 2016). India's dilemma is not to be simply rejectionist, at a time when many other states in South Asia and the Indian Ocean have embraced the MSR, but rather to craft positive alternatives.

Here, India's second response has been to push its own initiatives, with limited success. *Project Mausam*, stressing cultural links in the Indian Ocean has remained a largely paper project (Pillalamarri, 2014; Bhalla, 2020). The Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) initiative is a tacit "counter" (Chopra, 2016) to China's MSR. Some infrastructure initiatives at Pyara (Bangladesh), Duqm (Oman), and Chabahar have been pursued under the SAGAR umbrella; but SAGAR has been subsumed within the wider Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) announced by Modi in 2018 at the East Asia Summit (Panda, 2020a). With its focus on protecting the environment and pursuing connectivity, the IPOI has received a particular welcome in South-East Asia by ASEAN and its members, especially Indonesia. However, IPOI remains to be funded, institutionalized and implemented by India.

Third, India has moved to work with other similarly China-concerned states. This was first seen with the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) initiative proposed by India and Japan in 2016, but which subsequently languished (Tanaguchi, 2020). Perhaps most significantly, India has now moved towards the recent alternatives being represented in the US–Japan–Australia *Blue Not Network* (Panda, 2020b). Most recently, India, together with Australia and Japan, signed the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative (SCRI) in April 2021, aiming to reduce their dependence on China, and something that may well attract support from South Korea as well.

India has severe concerns about the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, funneled through Gwadar (Chinoy, 2021). Faced with China building up and operating the deep water port at Gwadar, which could also operate as a secure berth for the Chinese navy operations in the Arabian sea (Panneerselvam, 2018), India's response has been a decade-long interest in building up Chahbahar in nearby Iran (Khan, 2013). Indian financing led to India Ports Global Limited taking over running of the port in 2018, under a 10-year lease. This is an important feature in Indian diplomacy lauded at the "Chabahar Day" at the Maritime India Summit 2021 (Jaishankar, 2021b). Just as Gwadar is the entry/exit port for trade from Central Asia, so Chabahar is envisaged by

India as the port head entry/exit for the wider International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), coming down from Russia and Central Asia (Haidar, 2021). This is a long-running infrastructure project involving Russia, Iran, and India, and which is an alternative to China's East-West overland Silk Route. India is a key member of the INSTC, whereas neither Pakistan nor China is a member or even observer.

Finally, India has mooted the desirability of the Vladivostok to Chennai Corridor (VCMC), linking Siberia and the Russian Far Eastern province and their energy fields to Indian economic penetration and energy flows back to India (Kapoor and Iyer, 2020). In effect Modi's "Act East Policy" has been extended to an "Act Far East Policy" (Vasudevan, 2020). Prime Minister Modi flagged this up in 2019 at the Eastern Economic Forum, the so-called "Vladivostok moment" (Vasudevan, 2020), in which "Vladivostok will become India's springboard in Northeast Asia market", and a "confluence of the Eurasian Union on one side and the open, free, and inclusive Indo-Pacific on the other" (Modi, 2019). South Korea and Japan are envisaged as further potential participants. Potentially this could reduce the close geo-economic relationship between Russia and China, and would "counter" (Chaudhury, 2018). China's overland Silk Road project is going westwards across Eurasia. In extending up to Russia's Arctic routes, with the "Indo-Arctic" coined as a new strategic paradigm (Chandran, 2019) for India, the VCMC, could also sidestep some of China's growing presence in such Arctic route use. This initiative, though supported by both the Indian and Russian leaderships remains to be financed and operationalized. If running, then this would also pull India more into East Asia, but also create further unease over China blocking such energy flows through the South China Sea, in which India would have increased interests.

Covid-19

Covid-19, which first erupted in China in late 2019, has affected India's relationship with China in several ways.

First, China's attempts to cover up reporting of the outbreak, and then to shift the blame to the outside world increased distrust of China and of its announcement in India. This distrust of China has rumbled on. Overlapping with the Galwan confrontation, one Indian commentator noted in mid-2020 that "China is now a complete threat to India, as traditional (military) and non-traditional (health) hazards are visible in current situation" (Sharma, 2020). Indeed one ruling party politician, Sudesh Verma stridently commented that "who should be blamed for the pandemic? Very few are talking about China and the possibility that the virus has been unleashed to weaken

India" (Verma, 2021). At the end of May 2021, in a veiled criticism of China, India's Ministry of External Affairs called for "further data and studies to reach robust conclusion" and that "the follow up of the WHO report and further studies deserve the understanding and cooperation of all" (MEA, 2021b).

Second, during the first waves of the outbreak, Indian foreign ministry officials worked with weekly QUAD-Plus frameworks (the US, Australia, Japan joined by New Zealand, Vietnam and South Korea) during Spring 2020 to discuss Covid-19 cooperation. China's absence, pointedly not invited, was obvious.

Third, Covid-19 generated competition as China extended Covid-related assistance to smaller states in South East Asia and the Pacific in Spring 2020. In an attempt to pre-empt China, India launched *Mission Sagar*, a 55-day deployment by INS *Kesari* in May–June 2020, delivering Covid-19 related assistance to the island nations of Maldives, Mauritius, Madagascar, Comoros and the Seychelles. This Covid-relief rivalry emerged just as skirmishes in Ladakh, at Galwan and Pangong Lake, in May–June 2020 had sent Indian perceptions of China spiralling downwards.

As India and China both started producing vaccines for distribution to other countries in early 2021, "vaccine diplomacy" quickly became competitive between them (Singh, 2021; ToI, 2021a). The so-called *Vaccine Maitri* initiative followed Indian foreign policy in being directed first to India's immediate neighborhood, next to its extended neighborhood, and then further afield to Africa and the Caribbean (Jaishankar, 2021c). India's Foreign Secretary told one audience that "vaccines have become a very important part of our diplomacy, our foreign policy" and that "countries from our neighborhood [. . . .] have received Indian vaccines. They are grateful to India" (Shringla, 2021). Jaishankar, the Minster of External Affairs, went on Twitter on February 22, 2021 to announce that India's prompt dispatch of Covid-19 vaccines to Mongolia showed that India was "caring for a spiritual neighbor", an extended neighborhood partner in which the strategic opportunities for India have already been noted.

Covid-19 also strengthened Indian cooperation with its Quad partners. In another deliberate use of social media, India's Prime Minster Narendra Modi went on Twitter on March 12, 2021 to announce that, at the Quad summit then being held, the four partners were "united in our fight against Covid-19, we launched a landmark Quad partnership to ensure accessibility of safe Covid-19 vaccines". The "safe" reference probably pointed to China's more doubtful Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines, which had been criticized in the Indian media (India Today, 2021). Instead, Modi announced in this particular tweet on March 12, 2021 that "India's formidable vaccine production capacity will be expanded with [financial] support from Japan, US, and [distribution] Australia to assist countries in the Indo-Pacific region".

However, fourth, India's succumbing to a virulent second wave in Spring 2021 brought India to its knees. The open mocking of India in a *Weibo* post by the Commission for Political and Legal Affairs (CPLA) wing of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee was noticed in India (Patranobis, 2021), and overshadowed the formal sympathy extended by the Chinese leadership. This had further consequences. With India stopping vaccine exports, China has been able to step into the breach around South Asia. Following the videoconference organized in April 2021 by China with the foreign ministers from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, Bangladesh announced it had asked China to supply it with vaccines as soon as possible. China was also able to step in and donate 1.1 million Sinopharm vaccines to Sri Lanka in May 2021. Similarly in Southeast Asia, Indonesia and the Philippines switched from Indian to Chinese vaccine supplies (ToI, 2021c).

Fifth, India was then faced with logistics restrictions surrounding the import of pharmaceutical raw materials from China for Indian manufacture of vaccines. After some hesitation from the US, the Quad did rally round to offer further support to India, the US waiving patent protection. Nevertheless, India did face a dilemma in whether or not to accept Chinese offers of assistance made at the end of April 2021. The Indian government gave no formal response to China's offer of assistance, though the Chinese Red Cross did provide some assistance to the Indian Red Cross in the shape of 100 oxygen concentrators, 40 ventilators, other supplies, and some cash assistance. However that is not what India was particularly seeking. Instead it was significant that Jaishankar's discussions (MEA, 2021a) with Wang Yi on May 1 called on China to keep transport corridors and cargo flights open, and remove customs obstructions (a source of unnecessary restrictions in Indian eyes), so that Indian companies could more easily procure raw materials from China for vaccine production in India. Jaishankar also complained that disengagement along the Ladakh had not been completed by China.

Admittedly, in the wake of the Quad initiative to lend support to India, the BRICS Foreign Ministers Meeting in June 2021 did see generalized sentiments of cooperation, but very little of substance. The only specific criteria discussed in their Joint Statement was the future need for "timely establishment and effective operationalization of the BRICS Vaccine Research and Development Centre" (MEA, 2021c), which reflected a Chinese push for Sinovac to lead the Centre.

Six, the final knock-on effect of Covid-19 on Indian relations with China was that the Indian economy was damaged more than the Chinese economy. Covid-19 left the economic gap between them widening again in China's favor, which has further implications for envisaged spending programmes (India's internal balancing) to

redress the military gap with China. This makes India's need for external balancing all the more important.

Conclusion

India–China relations remain shaped by regional friction, focused around China's push along the Himalayas and more widely in India's immediate and extended neighborhood across the Indo-Pacific and Asia. With regard to the former, Jaishankar noted that "peace and tranquillity in the border areas is the basis for development of relations in other domains. If they are disturbed [by China], so inevitably will the rest of the relationship"; and with regard to the latter, "while both nations are committed to a multi-polar world, there should be a recognition [by China] that a multi-polar Asia is one of its essential constituents" (Jaishankar, 2021a). Galwan in 2020 dramatically sharpened India's concerns over China, while Covid-19 reflected and further exacerbated this two-level dynamics, resulting in further weakening of their global cooperation and sharpening their regional competition.

Much of this analysis and prognosis has followed international relations (IR) *realism* avenues, where Xi Jinping's steer gives a particularly hard edge to Chinese policies. In response, India's internal balancing is noticeable, but on its own insufficient. Consequently external balancing is necessitated, is evident but is more tacit than overt. In a sense, India is being diplomatic in not explicitly talking about external balancing towards China as a threat, but this is what its policies actually involve. Although India's external balancing is growing more evident, India's necessary military cooperation in its security partnerships with other China-concerned states remains a little hesitant, as has India's actual financing and implementation of counter-infrastructure initiatives. Indian concerns for strategic autonomy remain a factor here. However, casting the net wider than just the US mitigates dependency there, in which India's cooperation with Japan and France is a particularly useful extra ballast weight for India. Consequently, and essentially, India's move towards greater Quad (and indeed Quad-Plus) cooperation has become the "backbone" (Bagchi, 2020) for Indian foreign policy, post-Galwan and post-Covid.

To conclude, while some global cooperation between these two particularly large neighbors remains feasible, for example on environmental matters, regional competition highlighted under a two-level-analysis will be more apparent in their relationship, certainly under Xi Jinping's present trajectory. The stark fact is increasingly evident that India needs to balance, and is doing so; even if circumspectly and tacitly, with China implicitly in mind even if not explicitly and officially admitted.

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