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Geopolitical Tensions

China-India: The Stability-Instability Paradox

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SYNOPSIS

The China-India border clash could lead to various forms of military engagement. Notwithstanding the caution expected from both sides, real stability requires an agreement on the positioning of forces.

COMMENTARY

THE VIOLENT border confrontation between Chinese and Indian troops should not entirely come as a surprise. Though much time has elapsed since their 1962 war and lethal clashes between them in 1967 and 1975, frictions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) dividing the two forces have increased in frequency and intensity over the past two decades.

According to one study, as many as 30 "incidents" occurred between 2003 and 2014, growing from two in 2003-05 to 16 in 2012-2014. A major run-in took place at Doklam at the tri-junction of Bhutan, China and India between June and August 2017. Hand-to-hand engagement has occurred regularly. More serious fighting is but a step away. What are the risks and what needs to be done?

The Paradox: Stability & Instability

While few analysts have observed the nuclear dimension of the China-India dyad, the tension between the two displays characteristics typical of a "cold war"-type rivalry between nuclear-armed states: rising tensions, brinkmanship, and crisis proneness. A central feature of such conflicts is the "stability-instability paradox".

As enunciated in the heyday of the Cold War, the concept held that, because nuclear adversaries cannot afford to fight for fear of mutual destruction, neither will initiate nuclear war (hence, stability); but that, precisely because of this, conventional war remains a viable option (instability).

However, the history of nuclear dyads tells us something else: hostile nuclear powers invariably avoid major *conventional* war as well. As a matter of abundant caution, they try to stay on the "safe" side of two thresholds – those of nuclear and full-scale conventional war. In the modified paradox, varying forms of armed conflict short of major war occur periodically.

One well-known phenomenon is proxy war (using the services of third parties, including non-state actors), which has been a feature of the Cold War (in the Afghanistan theatre) and India-Pakistan rivalry (in Kashmir).

Others involve direct military action: one-off confrontations with limited violence (e.g. the shooting down of US reconnaissance planes over Soviet territory in 1960 and Cuba in 1962); occasional combat (US and Chinese aerial dogfights during the Vietnam War; sporadic military raids between India and Pakistan); frequent relatively low-level fighting (Chinese anti-aircraft batteries targeting US warplanes in Vietnam; India-Pakistan small arms firing); and more serious and sustained – but limited in scale and intensity – fighting (the Sino-Soviet border conflict of 1969; the India-Pakistan Kargil conflict in 1999).

Fallout of the Stability-Instability Paradox

Sino-Indian military engagement has hitherto been confined to scuffles, stone throwing and the like, but the trend is worrisome, especially now that there have been fatalities, with India admitting to 20 deaths and claiming an unspecified number on the Chinese side.

Which way(s) will the Sino-Indian conflict go? At this point, there is no knowing what each side's calculus is and any analysis that claims knowledge of leaders' motives and strategies is speculative at best. But some reasonable inferences can be made from nuclear-strategic history.

On the negative side, leaders under pressure are prone to demonstrate toughness and resolve in addressing adversaries as well as their own domestic audiences. President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi are populist strongmen under domestic pressure arising from the twin crises of COVID-19 and economic turbulence and are involved in a game of "chicken" that neither would want to "lose" by swerving away from a major clash.

Accordingly, both will be sensitive to the political cost of accommodation. And both will be tempted to push the envelope of psychological coercion to demonstrate an advantage. In addition, local military confrontations can easily go down a slippery slope of escalating tit-for-tat actions in the fog of crisis.

Drivers for Restraint

But there are strong incentives for both sides to exercise restraint. Unlike the other hostile nuclear dyads mentioned above, the China-India relationship carries a significant element of economic interdependence. Bilateral trade has grown enormously from US$ 2.2 billion in 2000 to US$ 90 billion in 2018.

Though the balance of trade is tilted heavily in favour of China, and China depends less on India than vice versa, Beijing's interest in sustaining India as a strong trade partner is heightened by its on-going trade conflict with the United States. Additionally, Chinese FDI in India is estimated to be anywhere between $2 billion and $10 billion, with China expected to account for the largest share of India's FDI receipts, though the pandemic may modify calculations.

But the strongest incentive to negotiate a compromise is still the presence of nuclear weapons. A pattern of cautious strategic behaviour is typical of nuclear belligerents. First, they tend to exercise unilateral caution and avoid major escalatory actions such as intensifying the use of military instruments or expanding the theatre of operations.

China and India have exhibited such prudence thus far: no shots have been fired. Even if they are, major military clashes along the 4,000-km border are unlikely.

A second aspect of cooperation is strategic engagement. This may occur in three ways: at the military level between local commanders; informally between bureaucratic/political envoys in backchannel talks; and formally between political leaderships. The immediate utilisation of the first option by talks between regional military commanders has been an encouraging sign.

Ultimate Factor: Political Solution

But any meaningful resolution of current tensions has ultimately to be political since it has to involve forward movement toward stabilising a long-disputed border. A Working Mechanism on Consultation and Coordination for India-China Border Affairs, created in 2012, has recorded no significant progress.

Political leaders have met periodically, often at the summit level, but this has not prevented the current crisis because they have not tackled the central problem.

The key source of military risk that needs to be addressed is the LAC. Disagreements over its precise delineation have produced local frictions over the years, with both armies jockeying for position on the ground. Military restraint is not a sufficient prerequisite for mitigating the nuclear risk associated with the stability-instability paradox.

India has pressed for a formal demarcation, but China has been reluctant, apparently anticipating that an agreement might prejudice its case on the border dispute. Prime Minister Modi's public assurance in 2017 to the contrary has not yet persuaded Beijing. With the precise coordinates of the LAC being the source of military tensions, an agreement on it is essential for enhancing stability. Whether Beijing will be agreeable is the critical question.

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