

## **India Must Master the Great Game**

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Strategic tensions between Asia's rising giants, China and India, are palpably worsening. While there's enough blame for this situation to go around, much of it does lie with China. But India also needs to rethink its approach to great power rivalry in order to manage the contest sensibly.

Last week, China denied a visa to an Indian general on the grounds that he was based in the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir. On Sunday, Chinese warships visited Burma for the first time. This stoked Indian fears of encirclement, a fire already lit by Beijing's port construction in Pakistan and Sri Lanka and its indefinite antipiracy presence in the Gulf of Aden.

By Tuesday, India's external affairs minister was telling parliament that Beijing was showing "more than normal interest" in Indian Ocean affairs. The opposition seized on media reports of Chinese troops being based in Pakistan's northernmost corner of Kashmir. And the China chill was lead item at a meeting of the prime minister's national security committee.

In recent years, Beijing has stepped back from earlier indications that it was willing to negotiate the disputed border, over which the countries fought a war in 1962. The state-run media have begun to attack India for supposedly hegemonic designs, with some publications hinting at the merits of a confrontation. Beijing has taken offense at visits by the Dalai Lama and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, over which China has rekindled a long-dormant sovereignty claim.

In April, Canadian researchers exposed the systematic penetration of Indian government computers from locations in China. And Chinese support for Pakistan shows no sign of abating, although these days it involves nuclear energy reactors rather than bomb designs.

For its part, the India military's transparent reinforcement of its border deployments -- however long overdue -- has fed Chinese claims to be the aggrieved party. And India's clamorous media and excitable strategic commentariat have fanned the fears. The echo-chamber of Indian television treats rumor as news -- false reports of border incursions in Ladakh last September were widely repeated. This makes formulating a rational China policy harder still.

New Delhi must act calmly but firmly in response to the latest challenges. China relations should be governed in part by the notion that discretion is the better part of valor.

There are mixed reports about whether India intends to snap all defense ties with China in response to the visa affront. To do so openly and clumsily would be a mistake -- precisely the kind that China made with its suspension of Sino-U.S. military dialogue over this year's Taiwan arms sales. Mistrust and wounded pride are not rational reasons to strangle the communications channels that might prevent military encounters from escalating into war. Nor should New Delhi sacrifice the upsides that its complex interactions with China have produced in recent years: India's largest trading relationship; dialogue on climate change and global finance; and a leadership-level hotline arrangement, however little-used.

But India does have several opportunities to play the game of strategic diplomacy more adroitly, in part thanks to China's own wider missteps in maritime Asia. From the waters off South Korea to the South China Sea, Beijing's recent assertiveness has gone down badly with many states, including South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia and Australia. These nations, like the United States, are keen to boost economic and security ties with India. New Delhi could credibly portray its rocky relations with Beijing as being of a kind with their own, and cultivate security partnerships accordingly.

While China has legitimate interests in Indian Ocean security thanks to its shipping and energy-importation, India has a growing and justified stake in sea lanes east of the Malacca Strait, too. Its seaborne trade with Asia-Pacific powers is rising rapidly -- China, ironically enough, foremost among them. So the Indian Navy has a rationale to step up exercises with partners beyond its old horizons. And if India seeks energy from locations far afield, whether Sakhalin gas or Vietnam's claimed zone of the South China Sea, then China with its own global quest for fuel can hardly feign surprise.

In more familiar waters, India has plenty of scope to expand its maritime surveillance and patrolling. This could be combined with support to weak, well-situated nations such as Mauritius, Madagascar and Maldives, as strategist C. Raja Mohan has argued.

For instance, it might not be too late for Indian commerce to play a role in the second stage of building Sri Lanka's China-funded Hambantota port, due to begin receiving cargo ships in November. Engagement of this type could be a springboard to cooperation with external powers, including China. Once it is bargaining from a position of confidence in its own regional relationships instead of paranoia over China's, India's strength will become apparent.

Despite its promising return to 8.8% economic growth, India is right to follow the advice of its former Naval Chief Sureesh Mehta to not try to match China's military weapon-for-weapon, dollar-for-dollar. Instead, New Delhi could pursue something like the asymmetry that Beijing seeks against Washington, including in the maritime, cyber and nuclear realms. A mix of development, deterrence and diplomacy will make India ready for rivalry.

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