

# India's Theatre Expansion: Use of Sea Power to Balance China's Rise

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## Abstract

There are geopolitical, strategic and historical reasons for a competitive and adversarial relationship between China and India. The border dispute is both a symptom and a trigger of this adversarial relationship. While border defences and the use of land and air power along the Himalayan frontiers is essential given the nature of the dispute, they are insufficient to deter China from using military provocations to unsettle India's foreign policy and limit it to a sub-continental power. This paper argues that sea power affords India the best way of managing China in the Indo-Pacific region. The development and demonstration of maritime power, particularly in the Indian Ocean and to the east of the Malacca Straits allow India a range of options in explicit and implicit strategic negotiations with Beijing.

**Keywords:** Sino-Indian Border Dispute; Indian Ocean; Indo-Pacific; People's Liberation Army (Navy); Line of Actual Control.

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## I. Introduction

In the past few years, the Sino-Indian relationship has wavered considerably, especially under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary, Xi Jinping, and India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi's leadership. The volatility exists despite multiple attempts by both sides to use bilateral, regional, mini-lateral and multilateral forums to improve the relations (Ghosh, et al. 2018). The ongoing stand-off between the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Indian Army at multiple locations along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Eastern Ladakh witnessed first-ever fatalities on the border in over 45 years (Singh 2020). The current stand-off, which has extended over six months, exposed the superficial nature of the bilateral relationship, which is camouflaged with cultural, educational and human to human bonhomie (Kulkarni 2018). However, there are geopolitical, strategic and historical factors leading to a competitive and adversarial relationship between the two countries. The border dispute is both a symptom and trigger of this adversarial relationship.

These frequent stand-offs and conflicts on the Himalayan border are not in India's broader interest as the risk of escalation is high and it drains India's limited resources, confines India to the sub-continent and has a psychological effect on India's Border States. India needs to explore various options which would enable it to enlarge the conflict to its maritime domain. This paper argues that India should develop and demonstrate capabilities in the Indo-Pacific theatre for creating a bargaining space for the future contingencies. The objective of theatre enlargement is not war, but a desirable equilibrium for altering the existing power balance, which is currently tilted in China's favour.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first section focuses on the geopolitical, strategic and historical factors resulting in competition and contestation between the two countries. The second section emphasises on limitations to India's continentalist approach in confronting the Chinese aggression. The final section reiterates the importance of sea power and provides multiple policy choices that India could adopt in the maritime domain to counterbalance Chinese aggression and create space for a political solution.

## II. Factors Impacting the Sino-Indian Relationship

Multiple geopolitical, strategic and historical factors compel China and India to share an adversarial relationship (Zhang and Sun 2019). These factors often undermine the headways made by two countries in improving the bilateral relations. The repeated Sino-Indian border stand-offs are a consequence of these unresolved factors.

### Geopolitical Factors

There are three geopolitical factors resulting in strategic competition between China and India. One, China and India share a 3500 km long border running through the rugged Himalayan ranges. There are three contested sectors where the 1962 LAC has served as the de facto border between the two countries. The eastern sector spans roughly through the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. The central or middle sector, west of Nepal, is the smallest contested area, which includes the Indian states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. While the western sector, and the current hotspot for the Sino-Indian border tensions, is in the Union territory of Ladakh (Fravel 2020). China and India disagree over at least 13 places about the location of the LAC across these three sectors. Due to the lack of consensus on

the international boundary, the patrolling units often run into each other, resulting in multiple stand-offs. There are set drills and procedures established under the confidence-building mechanism of the 1993 border agreement and subsequent acts on how to resolve these issues (Menon 2016). But the current stand-off, which has resulted in gun fires being shot for the first time in 45 years, indicates the approaching expiry date for these agreements (Gettleman 2020). Furthermore, with improved infrastructure on both sides along the LAC, the probability of repeated stand-offs in the future is high.

Two, besides land, the Asian powers also share a cross border water dispute. One of India's major rivers, the Brahmaputra, also called the Yarlung Tsangpo in China, originates in the Chinese occupied Tibet and flows into India before entering Bangladesh (Khadka 2017). The two countries share the classic case of an upper-lower riparian dispute. The crux of the dispute is related to hydrological data sharing, which China does with Bangladesh, but not with India. Furthermore, Beijing has recently signalled that it would now focus on the lower reaches of Yarlung Tsangpo by constructing a few dams – one of which will be double the size of Three Georges Dam (Lo and Elmer 2020). These would have strategic and environmental consequences for India.

Finally, the emerging bipolar structure, with the US and China being two poles, has pushed India towards the former (Kuo 2019). Although it is not a formal alliance, and India claims to have maintained its strategic autonomy, the recent logistic exchange (LEMOA), communication and security (COMSCASA) and geospatial information sharing agreements (BECA) are select examples of the increased Indo-US cooperation. The Indo-US rapprochement, among other reasons, stems from the insecurities related to the revisionist People's Republic of China (PRC) under the CCP, which is flexing its technological, military and economic muscles in the Indo-Pacific region. China views the Indo-US reconciliation as an attempt to contain its rise and the use of the *China threat theory* as an excuse to balance against it (Colley 2020).

## Strategic Factors

Besides geopolitical factors, there are also a few strategic drivers, which emerged in the last two decades, resulting in increased tensions among the two countries. The first driver is Chinese naval modernisation and its increased footprints in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). China's dependence on the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and its Malacca dilemma compel it to establish its presence in the IOR (Ji 2007). The 2015 defence white paper categorically asked the PLA to move from coastal defence to developing overseas capabilities (China Military Strategy 2015). Furthermore, *The Science of Military Strategy*, China's authoritative military doctrinal text, attributes particular strategic importance to a unified "two oceans region," encompassing the western Pacific and northern Indian Oceans (2013; Tarapore 2020). It calls for China to establish a presence in those oceans, extract their resources, influence countries on their littorals, and develop its military capabilities for those purposes (Tarapore 2020). In 2017, the PLA, after multiple denials, finally confirmed the establishment of its first overseas military base at Djibouti (Reuters 2017). The Pentagon's latest *China Military Power* report (2020) identifies several countries in Asia and the IOR, which could potentially be Chinese naval bases in the future. But the most likely ones among them are Gwadar in Pakistan and Ream in Cambodia (Annual Report to Congress 2020).

Furthermore, in December 2019, a Chinese research vessel, the Shi Yan 1 was also detected near Port Blair, which happens to be India's only tri-command base until now (Negi 2019). Research vessels are used for two purposes, to familiarise with the oceanic and geographic conditions, and assert sovereignty in the region. The Indian Navy reportedly expelled the Chinese research vessel from the Indian waters.

But, since 2009, the Chinese Navy has maintained an ongoing naval task group in the Gulf of Aden (Peri 2020). As Arzan Tarapore estimates, this task group, along with frequent research vessels and submarine deployments, means the PLAN maintains a constant presence of seven or eight navy ships in the Indian Ocean at any time (2020). Although most of the Chinese actions in the Indian Ocean until now are within the ambit of international law, the increased naval footprints directly impacts India's interests within the region, given the nature of the disputed relationship.

Two, India's strategic concerns have increased since the rollout of the Chinese Belt and Road initiative (BRI). India has stayed away from the BRI citing sovereignty, procedural and leadership issues (Kondapalli 2017). But, China's involvement in South Asia has increased in this decade since Xi inaugurated his flagship foreign policy programme (Ranjan 2019). '*China will deepen relations with its neighbours in accordance with the principle of amity, sincerity, mutual benefits, and inclusiveness, and the policy of forging friendship and partnership with its neighbours,*' said Xi in his 19th Party Congress speech in October 2017 (Xi 2017). China Institute of International Studies, a think tank under the People's Republic of China's (PRC) Foreign Ministry, released a report titled *BRI Opportunities and Challenges in South Asia* (Singh 2019), which highlights four strategically important infrastructure subprojects for China in South Asia: The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), the Trans-Himalaya Corridor, and China's cooperation with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives under the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (Singh 2019). Furthermore, in 2019, China also announced that it would establish a new pilot project Free Trade Zones (FTZs) in six provinces across the country to improve trade with the neighbouring countries (Wong 2019). The prime beneficiaries of these initiatives in South Asia would be Pakistan, Nepal and Myanmar. India has historically viewed this region as its sphere of influence, and Beijing's growing economic, political and cultural clout undercut New Delhi's influence especially with the smaller South Asian countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Myanmar. These countries could be tempted to view India as a hedge against China in the region for better gains, which is not an optimal situation for the former. Moreover, deep suspicion is attached to the BRI and to China's ulterior strategic motives regarding its military footprints in the region and its broader "great game," in which South Asia plays a pivotal role (Russel and Berger 2020).

Three, India shares a trade deficit of almost \$50 billion with China (The Economic Times 2020). The dependence for certain products like electronic equipment, raw material for medicines, fertilisers, etc., is exceptionally high (Kewalramani, et al. 2019). Successive Indian governments have raised this issue with the Chinese leadership on multiple occasions with the recent instances being the two informal summits between Modi and Xi (Ramachandran 2019) (Chaudhury 2019). However, the empirical data suggest that the Chinese leadership has chosen not to address India's concerns (Patronobis 2019).

Finally, China's increased influence in international organisations and the formation of newer regional institutions like the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, the New Development Bank, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, etc. provide opportunities to the PRC to hamper India's objectives. It limits India's participation in international institutions and blocking its voice as an emerging power in the anarchic international world. For instance, China's stand on India's entry in the United Nation's Security Council and Nuclear Suppliers Group are manifestations of such behaviour.

## **Historic Factors**

India was one of the first countries to recognise the existence of the PRC in 1949 (Hariharan 2020). Despite the promising start, the two countries fought a gruesome land war on the heights of the

Himalayan ranges in October and November 1962. Three years before the war, India gave political asylum to the Dalai Lama and his followers after they escaped from Tibet amid the Chinese crackdown. This has been an inflexion point in the relations between the two countries until today. The 1962 war, which resulted in India's defeat, created a feeling of antagonism which has been ingrained deeply into the Indian psyche. Furthermore, the ties between the two countries have become fraught due to multiple border skirmishes and stand-offs, Sikkim in 1967, Sumdorong Chu Valley in 1987, and Doklam in 2017, to name a few (Fravel 2020). The recent Galwan incident, which resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers, and the ongoing stand-off in eastern Ladakh are examples of mutual suspicion and distrust that the two countries harbour despite completing 70 years of diplomatic ties in March 2020.

Given the current improvement of the border infrastructure on both sides along the LAC and worsening of relations to historic lows, the probability of the Sino-Indian border stand-offs happening in the future has increased. The stand-offs, as witnessed from the recent Galwan incident, could turn into skirmishes and even conflicts, if these factors are kept unaddressed by both countries.

### **III. Limitations to India's Continentalist Approach in Confronting China**

This section examines India's continentalist approach and the limitations to it while confronting China. India is compelled to deploy stronger defences on its northern borders due to the standard Chinese 'salami-slicing' tactics along the LAC. However, it is not in India's interest in the dispute to escalate into a border war, accidentally or intentionally. There are four reasons for this: Falling into a two-front war trap with limited resources, improved Chinese capabilities with its Western Theatre Command (WTC) since Xi Jinping's security reforms, nuclear risk, and most importantly, under-utilising India's advantageous position in IOR which is constrained due to its continental preoccupations in the north.

The successive Indian army chiefs have cautioned about a possibility of India's two-front war, which would most likely begin on the LAC, but spread across to its western borders (The Economic Times 2018). In his first press conference after becoming the army chief in December 2019, Gen MM Naravane spoke of the 'collusivity' between Pakistan and China and said this could be 'both physical on land borders and in other spheres.' (Karanbir 2020) He claimed that India should rebalance its deployment from the west towards the northern sectors and focus on modernisation and capacity building (Karanbir 2020). The Indian army has conducted multiple simulations to map the scope and nature of a two-front war.<sup>1</sup> But its limited armed forces modernisation and weapons acquisition, lack of implementation of the reforms suggested by the successive committees post the Kargil War, meagre defence budgets over past several years, and relatively limited multi-theatre operational capabilities could mount a substantial challenge. The worry is even more poignant after accounting for the current COVID crisis and the impact it will have on India's economy in the near future.

Two, the Chinese deployment, firepower and infrastructure capabilities along the Sino-Indian border and the Western Theatre Command (WTC) have improved significantly since Xi's military reforms. Multiple assessments have noted that the total troop strength for China's WTC is around 2,30,000 (O'Donnell and Bollfrass 2020). This includes 70,000 troops from the Xinjiang Military District and 40,000-50,000 from the Tibet Military District (O'Donnell and Bollfrass 2020). In case of a long-drawn stand-off, like the one which we are witnessing in eastern Ladakh, the reinforcements to the WTC would most likely come from China's Central Theatre Command (CTC) and strategic reserve forces. Reforms have also streamlined the process of reinforcements and cross-theatre deployment (Kewalramani and

Desai 2020). In case of firepower, newer weaponry like the T-15 tanks, the PCL 181 towed howitzers, the GJ-2 advanced attack drones and the Z-20 multi-utility rotary-wing have been developed for the WTC since 2017 after the Doklam crisis (Desai 2020). Some of these were specially manufactured for operating in the Tibetan plateau region for an Indian contingency. China has also raised world-class infrastructure on the Tibetan plateau in terms of highways, rail links, airports, logistic installations and temporary shelters (Reuters 2020). More importantly, the national defence transport regulation passed in 2016 in the PRC's Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) approved the use of civilian infrastructure for national defence (April 2016). It coupled with China's National Defence Mobilisation law of 2010 and elevation of CMC National Defence Mobilisation Department in Xi's latest military reforms help CMC rapidly mobilise reserve forces and militia in coordination with the PLA services and theatre commands (Kania and McCaslin 2020).

Although the ongoing stand-off highlights India's capabilities to mirror Chinese deployment in case of an escalation, sustenance for long-term, especially considering the harsh terrains, logistical limitations and escalation of both eastern and western borders would be a challenging task for the Indian armed forces.

Third, both China and India are nuclear-armed countries with No-First Use (NFU) doctrines. However, there are ambiguities over the conditions under which China could act outside its NFU policy. But it is mostly directed towards the US threat from the east. In case of the ongoing China-India stand-off, there has been no attempt by either side to draw attention towards its nuclear capabilities (Sethi 2020). The recent 2020 Pentagon *China Military Power* report highlights the PRC strategists' discussions over the need for low yield nuclear weapons for the future contingencies (2020). The development of low yield nuclear weapons, the potential change in China's posture to Launch on Warning (LOW) and an anticipated doubling of its nuclear warheads in the next five to ten years would have an impact on how India views the Chinese nuclear posture (Zhao 2020). These developments, if true, could perhaps increase the risk associated with the border conflict.

Finally, there is an invariable maritime domain to the Sino-Indian conflict which works in India's favour. India's geographical location in the Indian Ocean at the crossroads of global trade, its proximity to the all-important IOR straits and the rising profile as a net security provider for the region is both a caution and concern for China. The PRC's interests in the IOR are expanding steadily due to its dependence on the Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOC) for trade, commerce and energy supplies, increased investments in the region under the BRI, and expanding Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) operations in the African continent. The PLAN still lacks adequate capacity as well as the capability to challenge the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean. It has limited experience in operations beyond coastal waters, limited blue water naval combatants, not enough basing agreements to operate in the Indian Ocean and limited long-range air strike capabilities (Gill 2020). More importantly, its logistical support such as mid-air and open-seas refuelling is still in the developing stage (Wuthnow 2020). Securing SLOCs in the Indian Ocean would be an extremely arduous task for China if India or other regional navies employ a naval blockade. China is well aware of this conundrum, and one of the ways to address this besides exploring alternative transit routes and improving the naval capabilities is to keep India actively engaged on the western and northern borders. This would exhaust India's significant chunk of capital resources and strategic minds, thus, resulting in relative neglect towards the IOR.

## IV. India's Way Forward: The Maritime Domain

The previous section highlighted limitations for India in keeping the conflict confined to the Himalayas. This section explores the ways and means in which India could use the maritime domain to alter the balance of power and create bargaining space for itself in case of an escalation. Before attempting to examine India's choices in the maritime domain to counterbalance China, it is desirable to briefly consider the general utility of seapower.

Seapower provides coalitional leverage, which army and air force could only provide on the escalation of the situation (Shrikhande 2020). A renowned US naval strategist and historian Alfred Thayer Mahan has argued that British control of the seas, combined with a corresponding decline in the naval strength of its major European rivals, paved the way for Great Britain's emergence as the world's dominant military, political, and economic superpower (The Office of the Historian: Department of State). Terms like 'leverage' and 'influence' are associated with sea power by scholars and naval historians like Mahan, Corbett and Gray (Gray 1992). Their individual work reiterated the importance of sea power, which is slow to act but could provide some rapid changes, altering the complete course of the dispute. More recently, sea power has been used to address mutual concerns and to counterbalance an emerging power, which could be a threat to regional stability.

India benefited from the use of sea power in the 1971 war when it launched operation Trident to inflict massive damage on Pakistan's naval vessels and port facilities (Pubby 2020). The audacious mission conducted by Indian Navy on December 4 and 5, proved to be a crucial turning point in the 1971 Indo-Pak War (Maru 2017). But more importantly, sea power provides conventional deterrence, both by denial and punishment, which is more relevant for India in addressing the rising Chinese threat on land and seas (Shrikhande 2020).

Expanding the theatre of conflict to the Indo-Pacific region, more specifically to the Indian Ocean and the east of the Malacca Strait, works in India's advantage. Despite being the world's largest Navy, the PLAN has operational limitations in the IOR (Brewster 2019). In comparison, the Indian Navy maintains a geographical advantage, maritime domain experience and awareness, and numerical superiority in this theatre, especially in the Indian Ocean (Baruah 2020). India's use of the maritime domain for addressing the Chinese contingencies can be divided into peacetime activities and activities during the border stand-off. The peacetime activities involve capabilities building (both indigenisation and transfer of technology), regional and extra-regional balancing, creating structures for intelligence sharing and altering its naval doctrine for the use of force. Activities during a stand-off include establishing a tripwire on its Himalayan frontiers and threatening to escalate in the maritime domain if a certain threshold is crossed, and making use of the peacetime agreements for force posturing on the east of Malacca and in the Western Pacific Region.

### Peacetime Activities

India should upgrade its naval capabilities by raising newer forces, improving the existing force structure, manufacturing modern vessels in quick succession and investing in the latest naval aviation and subsurface platforms (Rajagopalan 2017). It should also invest more in the sea-denial technologies like anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles, integrated and layer sensor systems, long-range naval bombers, sea mines, air defence systems, and so on (Desai 2020). But, factoring India's shrinking defence budgets and

the impact of the pandemic on its defence spending, maritime partnerships provide excellent alternatives to fill the gap (Rajagopalan 2017).

However, experience shows India's non-alignment mentality, making it recalcitrant towards such initiatives. For instance, it took over 13 years and repeated Chinese transgressions across the Himalayas and the South China Sea for the Quadrilateral Dialogue (Quad) to be upgraded from the mid-ranking official-level meeting to the foreign ministerial-level meeting (Madan 2020). Despite inviting Japan to the Malabar maritime exercises since 2009, India remained sceptical of the Quad to be an overt anti-China formation (Bedi 2020). Furthermore, Prime Minister Modi, in his 2017 Shangri la Dialogue keynote address, categorically stated that India would not participate in any formation or grouping which is directed against any country and India's conception of the Indo-Pacific is all-inclusive (2018). But the ongoing 2020 Sino-Indian stand-off would perhaps compel India to revisit some of its strategic choices from the past.

India has already signed Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement in 2016, which enables the US and India to access designated military facilities for refuelling and replenishment in four areas — port calls, joint exercises, training and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (Peri 2016). It has signed similar military-logistics agreements with Australia in June 2020 and Japan in September 2020, both during the ongoing stand-off. India also invited Australia to the Malabar trilateral naval exercises with the US and Japan (Jaishankar 2020; Chaudhury 2020; Bedi 2020). Such initiatives lay the foundation for greater military flexibility between the four Indo-Pacific stakeholders for the future.

However, I argue that it is in India's interest to step up and sign military-logistics and basing agreements with the Quad as a regional Indo-Pacific grouping. India should also consider such initiatives with regional stakeholders like Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, either bilaterally or under the Quad formation. These countries are also impacted by the Chinese maritime aggression in the South China Sea and would provide ideal basing facilities for the Indian naval ships in the region. For instance, the Indian Navy has extensive naval interaction with Vietnam – especially in training, repairs, maintenance, logistics, etc (Bedi 2020). Vietnam has also given limited berthing rights to the Indian Naval vessels at Cam Ranh Port. However, there is no defence partnership or basing agreement between the two countries. Such agreement, with Vietnam for instance – bilaterally or under Quad – would increase India's presence and provide operational manoeuvrability in the South China Sea, the western Pacific Ocean and the broader Indo-Pacific region. It should also consider increasing its cooperation in terms of basing and logistics agreement and information sharing with the extra-regional stakeholder like France in the Indo-Pacific theatre. But these agreements without the Indian naval capacity upgrade would be of limited use as diplomacy and military diplomacy only act as a force multiplier when backed by military strength.

India could also use the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the two India-driven forums to deepen cooperation with like-minded countries affected by Chinese coercion. Through these forums, India could provide limited diplomatic support against the increased Chinese coercion to regional stakeholders like Vietnam and the Philippines (Ramanathan 2020). These forums could also be used for discussing ways and means to share maritime intelligence and understand China's grey zone tactics (Ramanathan 2020). Finally, India should assist these countries with developing specific naval capabilities, which would help them reduce asymmetry with the PLAN capabilities in the region.

Finally, India needs to reconsider its naval doctrine, which was formed in 2009 just when the PLAN started venturing into the IOR and developing anti-access/area-denial capabilities (Singh 2019). Since then, multiple factors like India's threat perception, its economic performance which directly impacts the

capital expenditure, and China's capabilities and interests in the region have evolved. India's naval doctrine needs to accommodate these changing realities for giving itself operational freedom during a crisis. For example, the Indian Navy emphasises on sea control and power projection capabilities in the IOR, but with India's limited defence budget, the room for acquiring tools required for implementing these operational doctrines is minimal (Desai 2020). In such a scenario, I argue that India should prioritise investing in sea denial tools, which are relatively cost-efficient and would help in limiting China's footprints in the IOR during a crisis.

### **Activities During Escalation**

India should look to expand the theatre of conflict to the Indo-Pacific Region during the escalation of the Sino-Indian border stand-off. Furthermore, it should establish a tripwire on its Himalayan frontiers, which would implicate a response from the Indian Navy in the maritime domain should there be a forceful change of status quo (Tarapore 2020). It should utilise the peacetime capacity that it has built and partnerships that it has developed to establish Indian military's forward presence near the Strait of Malacca. More importantly, it should be able to convincingly communicate that India could escalate in the Indian Ocean if China doesn't stop its salami-slicing activities on its northern borders. In reality, India may not choose to escalate in the maritime domain, but the deterrent threat should be credible enough to provide a bargaining space for its land dispute.

Further, bilateral and regional basing agreements would also allow India to flex its muscle on the east of the Malacca Strait. Currently, an Indian naval vessel takes four days from the tri-service Andaman Nicobar command to reach the South China Sea.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, that vessel is either isolated or outnumbered in the Chinese backyard.<sup>3</sup> For credible force posturing, India has to maintain a permanent presence on the east of Malacca, and basing agreements with the regional and extra-regional stakeholders in the western pacific would help India in doing so. By investing in the assets in China's backyard, India with like-minded countries should attempt to tie PLAN down on the east of Malacca, thus limiting its footprints in the Indian Ocean Region. It should also consider participating in the Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOPS) with like-minded countries in the South China Sea (Shrikhande 2020). FONOPS serves two purposes: 1) Non-recognition of the territorial claims implying no country has an EEZ claim in that region 2) No country has a claim over the national airspace in that region (Shrikhande 2020). These FONOPS would reiterate India's beliefs in the maritime rules-based order, which is questioned by the PRC's assertive behaviour in the South and East China Seas.

All these possibilities could only be worked out if India focuses on its naval capabilities developments. No doctrine or posture changes will help if the naval modernisation takes a back seat. While border defences and use of land and air power along the Himalayan land frontiers is essential given the history of the boundary dispute, they are insufficient to deter China. Development and demonstration of maritime power, however, would allow India a range of policy choices which it could use in explicit and implicit strategic negotiations with Beijing.

## **V. Conclusion**

The ongoing Sino-Indian stand-off, which resulted in the fatalities of over 20 Indian soldiers and unknown PLA personnel, have significantly damaged bilateral relations. The multiple layers of unaddressed complexities in the Sino-Indian relationship make it a burning pot. The border dispute is both a symptom and a trigger of this adversarial relationship. Given the current improvement of the

border infrastructure on both sides along the LAC and worsening of relations to historic lows, the probability of such stand-offs happening in the future has increased. India could limit the cost of a stand-off by expanding the theatre to the Indo-Pacific region. Geographical advantage, the experience of operating in the Indian Ocean and distance from all the key chokepoints work in India's favour. However, it should also explore internal and regional balancing with like-minded countries and reconsider its operational doctrine, based on the newer threats and budgetary constraints, for a maritime conflict. The skilful use of the maritime theatre would not only deter the PLA but could provide India with a bargaining space for a political negotiation, which is necessary to resolve the border stand-offs on its Himalayan frontiers.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Indian Army Officer, Telephonic Interview with the authors, September 16, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous Indian Naval Officer, telephonic interview by the authors, September 19, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous Indian Naval Officer

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