

Current Sino-Indian Disputes and Development Trends

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Section 1 Recent Disputes and Flashpoints

The latest disputes and flashpoints between China and India primarily center on border issues, particularly in the regions of Arunachal and Ladakh. Both sides hold differing historical perspectives and geographical interpretations regarding the demarcation of the boundary line. Disputes over the sovereignty of these contested areas frequently trigger friction and military standoffs between the two nations. The latest disputes and flashpoints in the China-India border region are concentrated in the following areas.

Disputes Over the Line of Actual Control (LAC)

The core of the Sino-Indian border dispute lies in the specific course of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and the differing interpretations held by both sides. This historical origin can be traced back to the late 19th to early 20th century, when British colonial authorities attempted to delineate the so-called "McMahon Line." However, this line was never recognized by the Chinese government. Despite multiple border agreements reached between the two nations, differing interpretations of the LAC have resulted in numerous overlapping patrol zones along the frontier. India maintains its unilateral interpretation of the LAC in certain areas, while China steadfastly upholds its own position. This situation has heightened tensions in the border regions, with frequent clashes occurring during patrols and military deployments. Notably, the 1962 Sino-Indian Border War, though ending in a ceasefire, further entrenched divergent perceptions of the LAC's location. Compounded by complex geographical features and historically undefined borders, the eastern (Arunachal), central, and western (Ladakh) sectors have become flashpoints of contention.

The McMahon Line, central to Sino-Indian border disputes, remains unrecognized by successive Chinese governments. Established through secret exchanges between British Indian representative Henry McMahon and Tibetan local government envoy Shatse at the 1914 Simla Conference, this boundary sought

to delineate British India from Tibetan China, incorporating traditionally Tibetan territories like Tawang and Walong into India. The line generally follows the Himalayan watershed but deviates from natural geographical features in certain areas, such as the upper reaches of the Subansiri River, resulting in traditional Tibetan pilgrimage routes being placed on the Indian side. Despite discussions among Britain, China, and Tibet regarding Tibet's status and border issues, no consensus was reached, and the Simla Convention consequently never received formal signature and ratification from the Chinese government. From the Beiyang Government to the Nanjing Nationalist Government and then to the People's Republic of China, successive Chinese administrations have explicitly opposed the McMahon Line as part of British colonialist aggression. After gaining independence, India inherited this line and established the Northeast Frontier Agency in 1954 to administer the region. This action further escalated tensions between China and India, ultimately precipitating the 1962 Sino-Indian Border War. Although the current Line of Actual Control along the eastern sector of the Sino-Indian border roughly follows the route of the McMahon Line, divergent territorial claims persist. India incorporates this region into Arunachal Pradesh, while China maintains that these territories belong to the southern part of Tibet.



Figure 1: Schematic Diagram of the McMahon Line

The dispute over the western segment of the Sino-Indian border centers on the Aksai Chin region, an area of significant geographical and strategic importance.

Located in the eastern Karakoram Range, Aksai Chin lies between China's Xinjiang and Tibet regions, bordering India's Ladakh region. With a total area of approximately 43,000 square kilometers, roughly 30,000 square kilometers are contested territory between China and India. As a vital corridor linking Xinjiang and Tibet, Aksai Chin not only forms a crucial segment of the Xinjiang-Tibet Highway but also emerged as a potential focal point in the geopolitical rivalry between China, the United States, and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Historical documents and cartographic evidence indicate Aksai Chin was traditionally part of China's territory. However, in the 1860s, British surveyor John Johnson delineated the so-called "Johnson Line", incorporating the region into British India and sparking the sovereignty dispute. Although successive Chinese governments have never recognized this line, India continues to assert sovereignty over Aksai Chin based on the "Johnson Line." Since the late 1950s, China has established effective control over Aksai Chin, including infrastructure development such as the Xinjiang-Tibet Highway, thereby strengthening its governance over the region. However, due to fundamental disagreements over the area's sovereignty, friction persists in areas like field patrols and infrastructure construction. As both nations attempt to verify the precise location of the LAC, some previously ambiguous issues have become more concrete, intensifying tensions in certain disputed areas. Particularly when national security interests and ethnic sentiments are involved, effectively managing these disputes presents a long-term challenge. Even with recent improvements in Sino-Indian relations, many unresolved mysteries persist along the LAC in areas like Aksai Chin.

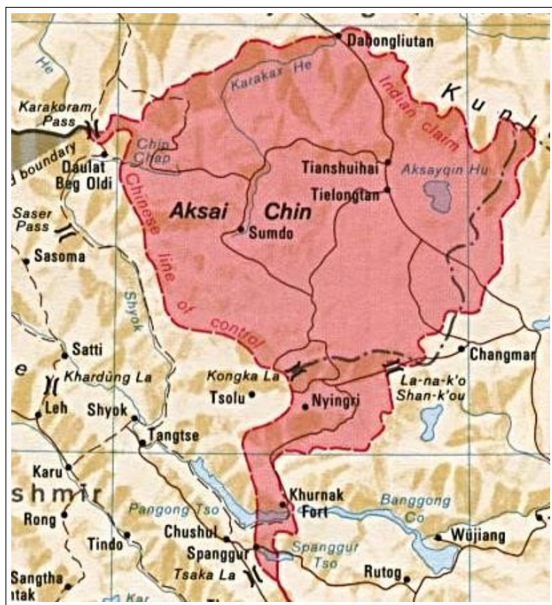


Figure 2: Schematic Map of the Aksai Chin Region

Military Deployments and Control Rules in Border Areas

In recent years, China and India have held multiple disengagement talks in border areas, achieving some progress. Nevertheless, both sides maintain a high level of vigilance regarding military

deployments in these regions. India has deployed additional division-level forces and strengthened its air force presence in border areas. China, in turn, has enhanced infrastructure development in border regions to improve its effective control over disputed territories. This intensified military posture has perpetuated tensions along the border.

Since the Galwan Valley clash in 2020, China and India have engaged in intensive diplomatic and military dialogues. Through multiple high-level military and diplomatic exchanges, including the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) and the Senior Headquarters Meeting (SHMC), both sides have sought to facilitate the withdrawal of frontline troops from friction points. This aims to reduce the risk of miscalculation and restore peace and stability in the border regions. On October 21, 2024, Corps Commanders signed a disengagement agreement.

Subsequently, both armies completed the military disengagement process at two key locations in Ladakh and "resumed patrols." Furthermore, during the Special Representatives' meeting on December 18, 2024, the two sides reached a six-point consensus, including continuing to take measures to maintain peace and tranquility in the border areas and promote the healthy and stable development of bilateral relations. Despite the disengagement agreement, both sides maintain high vigilance regarding military deployments along the border. Between 2017 and 2021, the Indian Army established or reassigned nine division-level units, reactivated three forward airfields in Ladakh, and constructed seven new forward airfields in Arunachal Pradesh. Additionally, approximately five dual-use airfields have been operationalized in Himachal Pradesh and Sikkim, enabling fighter jets and other aircraft to conduct missions more efficiently. Beyond conventional forces, India has deployed numerous paramilitary units along the border, such as the Border Security Force (BSF) and Assam Rifles (AR), to bolster border management and emergency response capabilities. India has also accelerated infrastructure development in border areas, including roads, bridges, and tunnels, to bolster its military presence. These new capabilities not only enhance rapid response capacity but also provide India with additional strategic options.

China, meanwhile, has bolstered infrastructure in border regions to improve effective control over disputed areas, ensuring smoother operations like border patrols. Since 2017, China has constructed three new airports in Tibet and upgraded the all-weather airports in Shigatse, Ali Qingsha, and Lhasa Gonggar by adding underground shelters and new runways. Through continuous improvements to border infrastructure, China has enhanced its effective management and control over disputed areas. This also means China can respond more swiftly to emergencies when necessary.

Despite progress in disengagement, heightened military deployments persist, maintaining border tensions. While India has committed to repairing bilateral relations and engaged in multiple rounds of border talks with China, it has simultaneously bolstered its military presence along the frontier. This

reinforcement may cater to domestic nationalist sentiment while solidifying India's military footprint in the border regions.

Aftermath of the Galwan Valley Incident

The 2020 Galwan Valley incident marked the most severe bloody clash in the Sino-Indian border region in recent years. Although both sides subsequently expressed commitment to resolving differences through negotiations, tensions in the border areas have not genuinely eased. Following the incident, both sides have adopted more cautious approaches to patrols and deployments in the border regions while enhancing communication through diplomatic and military channels. However, this communication has not fully resolved the disputes and points of contention between the two nations.

India has adjusted its policy toward China following the conflict, shifting from soft power containment to hard power containment. This is primarily reflected in increased military deployments and infrastructure development along the border regions, while also leveraging border disputes as a tool to achieve both international and domestic strategic objectives. In June 2021, Bloomberg reported that India had deployed additional army and air force units along the entire China-India border, bringing total troop strength to 200,000—a 40% increase from 2020. Additionally, India leased four Heron TP drones from Israel and purchased K-9 self-propelled howitzers from South Korea, deploying these assets to the border region in May. Following the 12th round of military commander talks between China and India in late July, reports indicated that Indian Air Force MiG-29 fighter jets had been stationed at Thoise Air Base near Leh, just 70 kilometers from the Galwan Valley. By September, the Indian Army deployed M777 ultra-light howitzers purchased from the United States along the frontline of the bilateral border. India's redeployment of resources to bolster border military deployments contradicts its stated intent to de-escalate tensions, revealing its objective to maintain tactical superiority on the ground.

Regarding equipment modernization, the Indian military has demonstrated a long-term strategy to match China's military capabilities and enhance its mountain warfare capacity. In April 2021, the Indian military issued a tender contract for 350 light tanks designed for high-altitude operations, signaling its long-term plan to align with China's military configuration and improve mountain combat capabilities. In July, Indian media disclosed plans to procure U.S. attack drones for "remote-controlled operations," explicitly targeting "cross-border strikes or border warfare." In infrastructure and logistics, the Modi administration has prioritized border infrastructure development. Between 2014 and 2020, India constructed 4,764 kilometers of roads and 14,450 meters of bridges in border regions—representing 30% and 200% increases respectively over the 2008–2014 period. Particularly following the border standoff, India mobilized substantial manpower to construct roads, bridges, tunnels, and outposts along the Sino-Indian frontier. In July 2021, the Border Roads Organization (BRO) accelerated road widening and camp construction along the Jammu-Srinagar-Zogila and Manali-Leh corridors to support the logistical needs of large troop and equipment deployments. Of the 63 bridges completed near the Sino-Indian border, 11 are located in the "Ladakh" region. In October, the organization also claimed a milestone breakthrough in the Sela Tunnel in

Arunachal Pradesh. India views these infrastructure projects as having "significant strategic importance for rapid military mobilization." India's border policy toward China demonstrates a comprehensive upgrade across multiple domains—including military strength, equipment, and infrastructure—across the short, medium, and long term. Its long-term stance of toughness and confrontation toward China has already taken shape.

Following the incident, China has also bolstered its military deployments along the border. It is countering India's hardline containment efforts through measures such as strengthening the Belt and Road Initiative's influence in South Asia and enhancing security cooperation with India's neighboring countries. Following the Galwan Valley incident, China has deepened military cooperation with other South Asian nations, supplying Pakistan with fighter jets, tanks, submarines, and various other weapons systems. These include J-10C fighters, J-35 fighters, hundreds of VT-4 main battle tanks, and 680 VT-4A main battle tanks. According to Pakistani media reports, Pakistan has approved the procurement of China-made J-35 fifth-generation stealth fighters, with Pakistani Air Force fighter pilots currently undergoing operational training in China. This will position Pakistan among the world's few nations possessing fifth-generation aircraft, significantly enhancing the capabilities of its air force. Additionally, China has exported military equipment to countries surrounding.

India, including Thailand, Serbia, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Kazakhstan, and Bangladesh. These exports encompass the Type 054A/P frigate, Type 071E dock landing ship, KF-3 air defense missile system, J-10CE fighter jet, VT-4 main battle tank, Wing Loong and Rainbow series UAVs, HQ-9 air defense missiles, L-15 "Falcon" advanced trainer aircraft, C-802 anti-ship missiles, S-26T conventional submarines, and JF-17 "Thunder" fighter jets. These exports indirectly weaken India's geopolitical influence.

Simultaneously, since 2020, China has deepened its prudence in economic and technological cooperation with India. It has implemented stricter reviews on technology exports and capacity cooperation with India, particularly reducing direct investment and technology transfers in sensitive sectors to prevent technologies from being used for purposes that could harm China. The Indian government has also banned Chinese mobile applications citing national security concerns, revised policies to strictly control Chinese investment in India, and halted existing cooperative projects. Through administrative decrees, it has forcibly reduced Sino-Indian economic and trade exchanges, severing the Indian market's ties with Chinese technology and capital to advance "economic decoupling" from China.

Following the Galwan Valley incident, the security dilemma in bilateral relations has gradually expanded from inland frontiers toward maritime domains. Concerned about Tibet's stability and border security, China's sense of insecurity and threat perception toward India has deepened. It seeks to mitigate its strategic vulnerability in the Indian Ocean and reduce India's military commitment to land borders by continuously expanding its maritime capabilities in the region. India, however, perceives China's military deployments along the Sino-Indian border and its expanding military ties and security role in South Asia

and the Indian Ocean region as challenging India's primacy on the Indian subcontinent. Through its "Look East" policy, India continuously pressures China, seeking to compel Beijing to slow or reverse its deepening and growing military engagement in the South Asian-Indian Ocean sphere.

Border Negotiations and the Search for Solutions-Disagreements on Military De-escalation

Despite existing disputes and points of contention in the border regions, both China and India are actively seeking solutions. In recent years, the mechanism for meetings between the Special Representatives on the China-India Boundary Question has been restored, enabling substantive discussions and the achievement of multiple

consensus points. These include enhancing communication and exchanges, ensuring the implementation of relevant work, and further strengthening the coordination between the Special Representatives' meetings and military negotiations. However, due to fundamental disagreements over the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the search for a solution remains fraught with significant challenges.

Currently, India emphasizes that "military de-escalation along the border" remains one of the top priorities for Sino-Indian resolution. According to The Times of India, India's Defense Minister noted that over 120,000 Chinese soldiers equipped with heavy weapons are stationed along the lengthy border with India. The newspaper also mentioned that China has deployed approximately 22 to 23 combined arms brigades, each comprising 4,500 to 5,000 personnel, along the Sino-Indian border front and in training areas. This indicates a long road ahead before achieving the goal of "troop withdrawals to peacetime garrisons." Simultaneously, the Indian military has reinforced or reassigned nine divisions (totaling 14 divisions) toward China, with no signs of change. Additionally, the Indian Air Force stated its deployments toward China have not undergone "immediate" adjustments, while the Indian Navy continues monitoring China's activities in the "Indo-Pacific region," noting China's conduct in this area shows no signs of alteration.

According to a statement by the Chinese Ministry of National Defense spokesperson on December 26, 2024, both sides have maintained close communication through diplomatic and military channels regarding the border situation, achieving significant progress. Currently, the two militaries are comprehensively and effectively implementing the agreed solutions, with smooth progress and positive outcomes. This perspective is acknowledged in the Indian Ministry of Defense's annual report, indicating that both sides have achieved certain results in easing tensions and promoting peaceful dispute resolution.

Specific Disputes and Actions in Recent Years

In recent years, several incidents of conflict have occurred in the China-India border region, the most notable being the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash. During these incidents, the two militaries engaged in standoffs and minor clashes in the disputed areas, resulting in casualties and prompting both sides to reassess border security. These events underscore the intensity of the border disputes and their impact on bilateral relations.

Evolution of Sino-Indian Border Disputes in Recent Years

In recent years, border clashes between China and India have occurred frequently, primarily concentrated at multiple locations near the Line of Actual Control (LAC), particularly in the Galwan Valley in the western sector and Arunachal in the eastern sector. The overall trend of border incidents in the China-India border region exhibits the following characteristics:

First, Standoff Incidents have Shifted from "Isolated Occurrences" to "Frequent Incidents."

In recent years, there has been a trend toward standoff incidents becoming more frequent, with the scale and intensity of confrontations between Chinese and Indian border troops also escalating. On June 18, 2017, Indian border personnel crossed the Sikkim border at Doklam Pass into Chinese territory to obstruct Chinese road construction activities, leading to the "Donglang standoff" that lasted over 70 days with Chinese border troops. On May 6, 2020, Indian border troops crossed the Line of Actual Control in the Galwan Valley region, constructing fortifications on Chinese territory to obstruct routine patrols by Chinese border forces. On June 15, Indian troops again crossed the Line of Actual Control in the Galwan Valley region and deliberately launched provocative attacks, triggering intense physical clashes between the two sides that resulted in casualties. This marked the first deadly border clash between China and India since 1975. On August 31, Indian troops again illegally crossed the line of control near the southern shore of Pangong Lake and the Rechen Pass, openly provoking tensions and drawing significant international attention. By late 2022, another clash occurred between Chinese and Indian forces in the Dongzhang area. Though smaller in scale, it further deepened mutual distrust.

Standoff incidents in the China-India border region have become frequent, with Indian actions escalating from "crossing the line provocations" to "violent attacks" and "firing warning shots." This not only increases the difficulty of implementing border management mechanisms and effectively controlling the border situation but also poses a real challenge to maintaining the status quo and peace and tranquility along the border.

Second, the Military Standoff Manifests as Multi-Point Confrontations

Conflicts in the China-India border region occur simultaneously or successively across multiple disputed areas. On one hand, **the geographical distribution of standoff incidents is extensive.** The disputed areas along the China-India border are primarily concentrated in three sectors: the western sector (Lahore region), the central sector (central Himalayas), and the eastern sector (Arunachal). On the other hand, **the number of standoff points has increased**, with multiple specific locations identified in each disputed sector. The Galwan Valley standoff and Pangong Lake standoff occurred in the western sector of Ladakh; the Depsang Plain standoff took place in the central Himalayas of the middle sector; and the Darak standoff and Dongchang standoff occurred in the eastern sector of Arunachal. Furthermore, **the duration of standoffs varies across different locations.** Some may last for days or weeks, while others persist for months or even longer. This multi-point standoff dynamic not only complicates the border situation but also makes it more challenging to resolve all issues through a single channel.

Third, Both Sides Maintained Diplomatic Engagement and Strategic Restraint

Despite the military standoff, China and India have maintained diplomatic engagement and strategic restraint, conducting multiple rounds of consultations. By the end of November 2024, following twenty-one rounds of corps commander-level talks and thirty-one rounds of Working Mechanism for Coordination (WMCC) meetings on border affairs, both sides continued candid, in-depth, and constructive exchanges on advancing disengagement along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the western sector of the China-India border. In May 2024, disengagement was achieved at four locations along the western sector of the border. On October 21, the governments of China and India jointly announced the formal conclusion of the four-year military standoff along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh. Both sides reached agreements on conducting patrols along the LAC and on disengagement. In November, China and India reached an agreement on military patrols and agreed to strengthen dialogue, promote the return of bilateral relations to a stable and positive track, enhance multilateral cooperation, and manage bilateral relations from a strategic perspective.

In recent years, several border incidents have occurred between China and India. The specific dates, locations, and developments of these incidents can be summarized as follows. As shown in

Table 1, these conflicts of varying scales reflect persistent tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) while also demonstrating both sides' efforts to achieve disengagement and de-escalation through diplomatic negotiations and military adjustments. These incidents not only reveal strategic considerations regarding national security and regional influence but also illustrate the complex interactions and escalating diplomatic and military tactics employed by both nations in managing border disputes.



Figure 3: China-India Border Issue
II. China-India Border Conflicts: National Strategies and Interactions Under the Rational Actor Model

Table 1: China-India Border Conflict Incidents, 2017–2022

Date	Location of Conflict	China	India	Area of Actual Control	Resolution
2017	Donglang Standoff	Large-scale military exercises	Procurement and Delivery of Large Quantities of Ammunition	China controls the Donglang and Lulin areas in the Zorna district; India controls parts of the Zorna district	August 2017 Agreement reached: India withdraws personnel and equipment beyond the boundary to its side; China suspends road construction for six months
2020	Galwan Valley	Physical altercations, military reinforcements	Construction of roads, bridges, and other facilities across the Line of Actual Control	China controls Aksai Chin; India controls Ladakh	China-India Corps Commander-level talks commenced in 2021; in October 2024, India's Foreign Minister announced both sides had reached an agreement, with prospects for disengagement
2020	South Bank of Pangong Lake, Near Rechen Pass	Attacked Indian soldiers with iron rods, injuring 72	Throwing stones, attempting to assault and detain PLA personnel; deployed over 500 tanks and infantry fighting vehicles	China controls approximately two-thirds of the eastern lake area and mountainous regions along both shores; India controls about one-third of the western lake area and portions of the mountainous terrain	Since February 2021, the two countries' armies began disengagement
In 2020	In the Depsang Plains of eastern Ladakh	Establishing military facilities and outposts	Establishing military facilities and outposts, conducting military exercises, and deploying	India takes control of the Depsang Plain	October 2024 Commencement of disengagement, mutual troop withdrawal, and dismantling of structures and outposts
2022	Bangong Lake, Divine Cannon Hill	Blocking Indian Troops Crossing the Border	Firing shots to threaten PLA patrols	military reinforcements	2022 Indian Troop Withdrawal and Disengagement

2022	Dongzhang Region	Demolishing Indian military fortifications	Patrols blocked	China controls the area north of Dogor Grassland and Dongzhang Waterfall; India controls Dogor Grassland, Dongzhang Waterfall, and the area south of them	2022 Disengagement
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In recent years, strategic competition among major powers has intensified, and geopolitical incidents have occurred frequently. Research on international relations events, particularly diplomatic decision-making, has evolved alongside practical trends, forming forward-looking analyses from multiple perspectives. In border conflicts between China and India, both nations' actions encompass military standoffs, diplomatic negotiations, and official statements. These reflect not only their efforts to safeguard geopolitical interests, national security, and regional influence, but also their assessments of the costs and benefits of action plans, alongside considerations of influencing the other party's behavior and expectations through signal transmission. Based on this, assuming China and India are singular, rational decision-makers—each selecting courses of action according to strategic objectives and the principle of maximizing interests—and analyzing the causes of the border conflict from this perspective can provide conceptual support for developing more targeted response strategies. This analytical process can be summarized as the Rational Actor Model (RAM).

The Rational Actor Model (RAM) is a classic theoretical framework in international relations and decision analysis, primarily used to explain the behavior of states or governments when facing decisions. 4 Under this model, states or governments are viewed as single, rational actors who select courses of action based on their strategic objectives and the principle of maximizing interests. 5 The fundamental assumptions of RAM include the single-agent assumption and the rational choice assumption. That is, states are viewed as unified, rational actors possessing clear objectives and intentions. When making decisions, the state as an agent calculates costs and benefits to select the optimal strategy for achieving its goals.

By translating the model's core concepts into utility functions, the costs and benefits of each response option can be rationally evaluated, yielding the actor's actions—its rational response to the strategic problem at hand. Employing the Rational Actor Model, we analyze the challenges faced by China and India, their available options, and their chosen actions by examining multiple border conflicts between the two nations. This reveals the objectives underlying their respective actions—such as probing each other's strategic intentions, catering to domestic nationalist sentiments, or enhancing international standing—and enables us to deduce the benefit calculations underlying state behavior. Key findings are summarized below.

Table 2: Core Concepts of the Rational Actor Model (RAM)

Concept	Objectives	Alternatives	Consequences	Choice
Meaning	A state's actions are driven by the pursuit of specific objectives, such as security, power, or economic interests.	When making decisions, states consider multiple possible courses of action.	Each option carries a range of potential outcomes, and the state evaluates the value of these outcomes.	The state selects the course of action that maximizes its interests.

Objectives: National Goals and Interests

In the long term, border conflicts between China and India serve their respective long-term objectives, such as economic development and enhanced regional influence. Each specific border clash involves short-term objectives like controlling key positions in disputed areas or testing the speed and intensity of the other side's response. These short-term actions are undertaken to achieve the

long-term strategic interests of both nations in regional affairs—namely, influence and control. Even when short-term friction exists, both sides strive to avoid full-scale war, as it would not align with their long-term interests.

The border conflicts between China and India reflect each nation's pursuit of national interests and security objectives. Under the rational actor model, both countries' actions aim to maximize their strategic interests, including safeguarding territorial integrity, national security, and regional influence. The Chinese government prioritizes national security, territorial integrity, and international standing, committing to resolving

border disputes through peaceful negotiations. Similarly, the Indian government focuses on safeguarding its sovereignty and security interests, taking necessary measures to ensure frontier security in the face of potential threats and regional influence competition from China.

The 2017 Doklam standoff is regarded as one of the most impactful events in Sino-Indian relations since the end of the Cold War. However, this military confrontation lasting over 60 days did not precipitate a prolonged downturn in bilateral ties. Instead, following the Doklam incident, Sino-Indian relations witnessed a rapid warming trend driven by proactive engagement between the two nations' leaders. Notably, at the BRICS Summit in Xiamen on September 5, 2017, Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi emphasized their fundamental assessment that each country represents a development opportunity for the other and poses no threat, demonstrating both sides' profound understanding of the situation and their expectations for future cooperation.

China and India's swift recovery from and transcendence of the Doklam incident reflects not only their profound recognition of

current realities and rational assessment of future developments, but also their shared expectations for the long-term trajectory of bilateral relations. First, the extensive common interests and cooperative prospects between China and India are crucial factors. As representatives of emerging economies, the two nations share asymmetric interdependence in areas such as energy consumption, trade relations, and technology transfer. This economic reliance prompted India to consider withdrawing its troops to restore normal economic ties. Secondly, ensuring stability in the southwest strategic direction has become a key objective of China's policy toward India. Within China's broader strategic framework, maintaining stable Sino-Indian relations helps prevent recurrences of incidents like the Doklam standoff and aligns with China's need to conserve resources on secondary strategic fronts while focusing on primary strategic directions (such as maritime competition with the United States). Consequently, even after the Galwan Valley incident in 2020 intensified bilateral tensions, China's fundamental stance on Sino-Indian relations remained unchanged.

Alternatives: Rational Choice and Strategic Environment Assessment

In border conflicts, both China and India prepare diverse response plans by assessing each other's strategic intentions and capabilities, selecting action strategies with the lowest costs and highest benefits. These strategies encompass diplomatic negotiations, military standoffs, or small-scale clashes near the Line of Actual Control, all aimed at achieving respective objectives. Before each conflict, both sides conduct cost-benefit analyses to weigh whether it is worthwhile to demonstrate strength through force or seek diplomatic solutions. If one side perceives the current situation as favorable, it tends to adopt a tougher stance; conversely, it may be more inclined to compromise. Different response options can lead to varying outcomes.

China's potential responses to Sino-Indian land border conflicts primarily encompass cooperative strategies and military control strategies. Following the Doklam incident, China adopted a cooperative strategy, utilizing informal leadership meetings to communicate with India and signal willingness to collaborate. This approach sought to build consensus across multiple domains to stabilize the Southwest strategic direction. In the short term, this strategy helped ease bilateral tensions and prevented conflict escalation. However, in the long run, due to India's differing interpretations and responses to China's cooperative signals, China's cooperative strategy failed to fully achieve its objectives and did not deter India's provocative actions regarding border issues. Following the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, China adjusted its strategy by increasing infrastructure development in disputed areas, enhancing logistical support capabilities and rapid troop deployment capacity. Concurrently, it bolstered military personnel and equipment, established forward outposts and bases to monitor border conditions and respond swiftly to emergencies, and conducted multiple military exercises, demonstrating a strong will to assert effective control.

In terms of outcomes, China's cooperative strategy may deepen economic interdependence between the two countries in the short term. However, in the long run, if political relations deteriorate, it could lead to economic losses. Meanwhile, actions to strengthen

military presence are perceived by India as provocative, exacerbating regional instability. Furthermore, China's strategic shift may also make India feel that China's stance on border issues is not sufficiently firm, thereby increasing the likelihood of India taking more aggressive actions.

India's potential responses to border conflicts with China primarily include hedging strategies and military-diplomatic containment approaches. Following the Doklam standoff, India adopted a hedging strategy: maintaining communication with China while simultaneously bolstering infrastructure development in disputed border areas and monitoring the implications of Tibet-related issues and the Belt and Road Initiative. This indicates India remains vigilant even amid improving bilateral relations. India has also actively participated in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) mechanism involving the United States, Japan, and Australia, and established the "Quad Plus" multilateral dialogue mechanism at the deputy foreign minister level with other nations. This has enhanced its influence in regional security affairs, serving as a counterbalance to China. Additionally, India has implemented a series of economic sanctions against China and launched a "self-reliance movement" aimed at reducing dependence on external products, particularly those manufactured in China. In terms of outcomes, India's response has to some extent strengthened its position in the border dispute, but it has also heightened tensions between China and India, leading to the Galwan Valley clash and subsequent standoffs, further deteriorating bilateral relations. India has not only enhanced its military capabilities and strategic coordination but also intensified cooperation with its South Asian neighbors to consolidate its traditional influence in the region and counter China's growing influence there.

Consequences: Limited Rationality and Information Asymmetry

Interactions between the two nations in border regions are viewed as repeated games under imperfect information, where strategic engagements are shaped by expectations of each other's intentions and actions. However, incomplete or misinterpreted information leads to cognitive biases and communication barriers, causing decision-making errors or misjudgments of the other's true intentions, thereby triggering unnecessary tensions. For instance, following the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, both sides gained deeper insights into each other's actions and intentions, which subsequently influenced their policy choices and actions. The Sino-Indian border dispute constitutes a classic repeated-round game with incomplete information and observable actions. Each side's interests regarding border issues remain incomplete and opaque to the other, necessitating careful analysis of signals emitted. Consequently, Sino-Indian interactions exhibit distinct phased characteristics, with significant shifts in perception and strategic adjustments occurring at different stages.

First, during the 2017 Doklam standoff, China and India engaged in over 60 days of confrontation before ultimately disengaging and restoring border stability. Throughout this period, both sides closely observed each other's actions and inferred motives based on behavior, effectively engaging in a game under conditions of incomplete information. Their post-Doklam assessment of gains and losses significantly influenced subsequent strategic

choices. India perceived that while China adopted a hardline stance initially, it demonstrated greater flexibility as the standoff prolonged. Consequently, India believed that by maintaining its position, China would ultimately compromise to avoid escalation. China, guided by cost-saving principles and risk aversion to avoid conflict escalation, prioritized conflict de-escalation as the primary cost-benefit criterion in its Donglang incident strategy. This divergence in interpreting the game's outcome stemmed from fundamental differences in policy expectations between the two sides.

From 2018 to 2019, noting that the conflict had not escalated and that Modi demonstrated willingness for dialogue, China adopted a strategy of strengthening cooperation to improve bilateral relations. It adhered to the "Three Nos" principle on border issues—no loss of control, no confrontation, and no derailment—and signaled cooperation through two informal leader meetings in 2018 and 2019. However, India did not interpret China's cooperative signals in a manner aligned with Beijing's expectations. Influenced by Kautilya's Arthashastra, the ancient Indian founder of strategic thought, some Indian elites viewed China's emphasis on geopolitics and great power balancing as tactical short-term strategies, harboring skepticism toward China's cooperative overtures. Retired Indian Army officer Subhash Kapela dismissed China's cooperative signals as meaningless, asserting that "China's current 'thawing' of political relations with India does not reflect a genuine desire to improve ties." Furthermore, China's sustained infrastructure development along the Line of Actual Control since 2017 was perceived by India as unilateral attempts to alter the status quo, deepening Indian distrust.

Drawing on lessons from the previous two phases, India concluded that China might again employ appeasement tactics. Consequently, India implemented its proactive conflict strategy, triggering a series of confrontations along the western border starting in April 2020. China observed that India's actions not only resisted Beijing's overtures for cooperation but also replicated the pattern of gaining advantages through deliberate provocation seen during the Doklam standoff. Influenced by this, China abandoned the restraint strategy employed during the Donglang incident and instead adopted tit-for-tat measures, demonstrating a strong will to confront. Since 2020, the willingness to confront between China and India has intensified, making it difficult for cooperative signals to be positively received. This has led to the cooperative strategies that both countries had adopted to varying degrees since 2018 becoming unsustainable.

Choice: Signal Transmission and Strategic Communication

In multiple border conflicts, both China and India have conveyed signals through military exercises, diplomatic statements, and actions near the Line of Actual Control to influence each other's behavior and expectations. The transmission and interpretation of these signals play a crucial role in either escalating or de-escalating conflicts. Overall, China's signaling tends to demonstrate a willingness to cooperate, aiming to reassure India through collaboration, avoid conflict escalation, and pursue stability in Sino-Indian relations and China's strategic direction in the southwest. India, however, places greater emphasis on shifts in relative standing. It not only considers the benefits of engagement with China but also scrutinizes how such benefits

impact the relative positions of both nations. India's perception of Sino-Indian relations, which does not accept the objective gap in capabilities, has led China to employ deterrence signals through displays of strength rather than direct use of force. This approach aims to contain and stabilize India while effectively addressing the geopolitical challenges in the southwest strategic direction.

From the Doklam standoff to the Galwan Valley clash and the Pangong Tso lakefront confrontation, China and India have repeatedly tested each other's red lines through their respective actions and assessed each other's behavioral expectations. During the 2017 Doklam standoff, India adopted a proactive conflict strategy while China demonstrated restraint. Subsequently, informal meetings between the two leaders in Wuhan and Chennai were interpreted as signals of cooperation. Since 2017, the Chinese and Indian militaries have held 21 rounds of corps commander-level talks, aiming to ease border tensions and seek solutions through high-level meetings and dialogue mechanisms. Furthermore, interactions within multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Defense Ministers' Meeting, along with signed border management and confidence-building measures—including the reaffirmation of the Agreement on Maintaining Peace and Tranquility in the Areas Along the Line of Actual Control between China and India—constitute vital components of strategic communication. These initiatives provide additional avenues for bilateral engagement, while official press releases and media commentary serve as critical channels for information dissemination.

The actual deployment of military forces also serves as a form of signaling, with both sides conveying strategic messages through military deployments and operations in disputed border areas. Since 2017, India has increased troop strength and military infrastructure construction along the Sino-Indian border, while advancing its military modernization program. This includes establishing multiple air bases, deploying mountain divisions to the border region, and formulating plans for multi-service deployments and infrastructure networks in border areas. These actions reflect India's military response to its perceived "threat" from China and its policy intent to enhance rapid deployment capabilities along the border. Concurrently, China has demonstrated its military capabilities and deterrence signals through large-scale military exercises and infrastructure construction near the Line of Actual Control (LAC). According to The Times of India, over 60,000 troops are deployed along the Sino-Indian border. This massive military presence serves not only as mutual deterrence but also reflects the respective governments' stances and resolve.

Section 3 Domestic Political Factors Influencing the Dispute

Domestic political factors play a pivotal role in the Sino-Indian border dispute. In China, emphasizing national sovereignty and territorial integrity is central to the legitimacy of the Communist regime. In India, heightened nationalist sentiment subjects the government to intense domestic political pressure in managing border disputes with China, necessitating a firm stance to uphold national dignity and territorial sovereignty. The political factors influencing the Sino-Indian border dispute primarily encompass the following four aspects.

The Profound Impact of Historical Legacy Issues

One root cause of the Sino-Indian border dispute lies in historical legacy issues, manifested in two primary aspects.

First, there exists a wide divergence regarding the precise demarcation of the Sino-Indian border. Both sides have never reached an agreement on the specific borderline, particularly concerning the Aksai Chin region in the western sector and Arunachal in the eastern sector. The Sino-Indian border spans approximately 2,000 kilometers and is conventionally divided into three segments: eastern, central, and western. The eastern sector refers to the border east of Bhutan; the central sector refers to the Sino-Indian border between Nepal and Indian-administered Kashmir; the western sector refers to the border between Indian-administered Kashmir and China. China and India hold significant divergences regarding the precise course of the Sino-Indian border. In the eastern sector, China asserts that the border lies along the southern foothills of the Himalayas, while India maintains that the border follows the "McMahon Line" along the Himalayan ridgeline; This segment involves territorial disputes covering approximately 90,000 square kilometers. In the central segment, both countries assert that the border follows the Himalayan ridgeline, but they disagree on the attribution of certain areas within this zone; the territorial dispute here covers about 2,000 square kilometers. In the western sector of the Sino-Indian border, China asserts the boundary lies along the Karakoram Range, while India claims it follows the Kunlun Range to the north; this sector involves territorial disputes covering as much as 33,000 square kilometers.¹⁰

Secondly, historically, the China-India border has never been formally demarcated. Prior to the 19th century, the border regions were predominantly sparsely populated, characterized by high-altitude cold zones or dense mountain forests. Although both nations had a vague understanding of the border, this geographical environment also limited ancient control over the area, resulting in no border disputes between the two countries. However, with historical progress, surveying and cartography advanced significantly. Western missionaries introduced modern scientific concepts during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. By the Kangxi era, scientific methods were employed to map territories, gradually clarifying China's borders—including Tibet—and establishing the traditional customary boundary line between China and India. Yet, during the Qing Dynasty's decline, Britain seized the opportunity to unilaterally draw the illegal "McMahon Line" along the Tibetan border, attempting to annex parts of Tibetan territory to India. Despite this line never gaining international recognition and being consistently rejected by successive Chinese governments, the Sino-Indian border issue remains unresolved. After World War II, despite the decline of colonialism and international conferences addressing territorial demarcations, the Sino-Indian border issue remained unresolved. India exploited the post-war chaos to encroach upon disputed territories, ultimately triggering the 1962 Sino-Indian Border Self-Defense Counterattack. Despite China's decisive military victory and subsequent voluntary withdrawal, the 2,000-kilometer Sino-Indian border remains formally undemarcated to this day, persisting as a major challenge in bilateral relations.

Moreover, British colonial rule in India and its expansionist policies significantly exacerbated border disagreements between

China and India, sowing seeds for future disputes. First, British expansion complicated the border. For much of the British occupation of India, the Sino-Indian border remained undemarcated. Simultaneously, Britain advanced differing claims over the eastern, central, and western segments of the border, which diverged from the Chinese government's understanding. Britain consistently maintained that the eastern segment of the Sino-Indian border lay along the southern foothills of the Himalayas. However, after 1936, Britain began treating the 1914 "McMahon Line" as the boundary for this region, directly contradicting the Chinese government's position. In the central sector, the British Indian government incorporated traditional Tibetan pastoral lands south of certain mountain passes—areas long administered by the local Tibetan government—into India, further intensifying border disputes. Second, the Sino-Indian border remained ambiguous under British colonial rule. In the western sector, maps published by the British government often omitted the Sino-Indian border. Some even ambiguously assigned large swathes of territory claimed by China to India, complicating the border issue. After India gained independence, the Indian government inherited Britain's expansionist policy on the Sino-Indian border issue. Following 1954, official Indian maps even marked the entirety of the border claimed by India with symbols denoting a settled boundary. Third, colonial rule led to the formation of the Line of Actual Control. During British colonial rule, due to the Indian government's expansionist policies and China's actual circumstances, certain lines of actual control emerged in the border regions between China and India. After World War II, the Indian government took advantage of the fact that the People's Republic of China had not yet liberated Tibet and the outbreak of the Korean War to accelerate its advance toward the "McMahon Line," gaining control over vast areas south of this line. These lines of actual control later became major points of contention in the Sino-Indian border dispute.

Current State and Impact of Strategic Mutual Trust Deficit

The weak foundation of political and strategic mutual trust between China and India, coupled with public perceptions of the current situation, the Indian strategic community's understanding of China, and trends in India's China policy, make it unlikely that a fair, reasonable, and mutually acceptable solution will be reached in the short term.

First, limited people-to-people exchanges between China and India, coupled with a growing trend toward negative perceptions, erode the public support base for bilateral relations and undermine the friendly atmosphere necessary for resolving border issues. Despite gradually strengthening ties, people-to-people interactions remain limited relative to the two nations' vast populations, restricting opportunities for mutual understanding and shaping perceptions of each other. Statistics show that in 2019, over 200,000 Chinese tourists visited India. However, since 2020, direct flights between the two countries have ceased, and India announced stricter controls on the number of visas issued to Chinese nationals. By 2023, the number of Chinese tourists entering India had plummeted to just 10,000. Furthermore, Pew Research Center surveys indicate that since 2016, favorable views between Chinese and Indian citizens have declined while negative perceptions have risen. Notably, a significantly higher proportion of Indians now hold negative attitudes toward China's economic growth and

investments.¹¹ This entrenched negative public perception in India has constrained the Indian government's policy space in addressing border issues, complicating efforts to resolve them. Simultaneously, the Galwan Valley standoff, which escalated into severe physical clashes, has fueled anti-China sentiment in

Indian public opinion. This further complicates diplomatic and military efforts by both sides and heightens uncertainty in subsequent border negotiations.

Second, India's strategic community and decision-makers have altered their perception of China, believing that China's stance on resolving the boundary issue, its recognition of India's importance, and its respect for and consideration of India's concerns have undergone significant changes. These perceptions include:

- A shift in China's stance toward resolving the Sino-Indian border issue, with diverging views on whether an early resolution remains a strategic objective
- China no longer prioritizes India's role and standing in global governance, significantly diminishing the global and strategic significance of Sino-Indian relations
- China no longer respects and accommodates India's core concerns, with perceptions that China's sensitivity toward India's concerns has weakened
- China no longer views India as an equal partner but seeks to shape the international political and economic order according to its own interests.

Some Indian scholars even suggest that the border standoff may stem from China's desire to symbolically reposition India one or two tiers lower, restoring it to its perceived place. Influenced by these perceptions within India's strategic circles and decision-making echelons, the foundation of political mutual trust between China and India has been further eroded, posing tangible challenges to resolving the boundary issue.

Third, India's policy toward China has undergone significant shifts. Currently, both the domestic and international environments for building a "closer development partnership" between China and India have changed markedly. On one hand, influenced by economic development, public opinion, and external factors such as the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, India's China policy is trending toward greater assertiveness and faces a critical directional choice. The Modi administration previously pursued a "dual-track policy" of economic cooperation and strategic balancing toward China. However, since the Galwan Valley clash, it has adopted economic "decoupling" and military "confrontation," with its China policy trending toward strategic competition and hedging. On the other hand, the generalization of the security dilemma undermines political mutual trust. India's security dilemma with China has expanded, with political suspicion and strategic concerns significantly increasing. This has led to shifts in India's stance toward China's development and the development of bilateral relations, notably weakening the foundation for building a closer development partnership between China and India.

The Dual Impact of Nationalist Sentiment and National Consciousness

Both China and India are at critical stages of economic development, with their populations harboring strong national dignity and ethnic sentiments. This heightened national consciousness and

nationalism have compressed the policy space for addressing border issues, undoubtedly complicating their resolution.

On one hand, historical legacies and national sentiments within this consciousness continue to trouble the development of bilateral relations. India's intense nationalist sentiments toward China partly stem from the historical context of the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Following the border conflict, India's national psyche suffered a severe blow. For a long time, it has not truly emerged from the shadow of defeat in the 1962 border clash, harboring persistent and profound insecurity toward China. This insecurity has further amplified India's nationalist sentiments, making it difficult for China and India to establish genuine mutual trust on border issues.

Historical legacy issues and national sentiments have become major obstacles to resolving the border dispute. The historical border dispute is an extremely sensitive issue between China and India, touching upon both nations' national sentiments and their respective prestige and dignity. Borders and territories are closely tied to national sentiment and state interests, making them particularly prone to triggering intense national consciousness and widespread patriotic sentiment. As a multilingual, multicultural nation lacking unified political organization, India relies on nationalism as a key means to unite its people. The government stirs nationalist sentiments through border disputes and the Tibet issue, channeling these sentiments through its political mechanisms and processes into foreign policy. Nationalist sentiments have intensified tensions in the Sino-Indian border dispute. Influenced by factors including Hindu nationalism, India seeks to resolve the border issue swiftly in its favor to address domestic nationalist demands. Consequently, it pursues radical and adventurous policies on the border, repeatedly provoking confrontations in border regions.

National consciousness shaped India's pursuit of becoming a "leading power". National consciousness shaped India's pursuit of becoming a "leading power." After independence, constructing a unified national identity became a crucial task for the Indian government. In this process, territorial issues became highly emotionalized, viewed as matters concerning the sacred territorial integrity of the motherland. Since Modi took office, India's foreign policy has progressively shifted to the right, with a policy vision seeking global power status grounded in Hindu nationalism becoming prominent. This forms the aggressive starting point for its border policy toward China. The Modi government's pursuit of "leading power" status is precisely the practical manifestation of this goal. Strategically, the Modi administration champions the "Greater India" concept encompassing the South Asian subcontinent and a robust diplomatic approach. It advocates actively developing hard power centered on military strength, promotes the soft power of Hindu civilization, and adheres to the principles of India First and interest's paramount. In 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) incorporated the concept of "Ancient India" as a key foreign policy focus in its election manifesto, signaling a heightened nationalist component in Modi's foreign policy.

The Modi administration's assertive stance has profoundly impacted the Sino-Indian border dispute. Regarding China, the BJP—to which multiple core members of the Modi government

belong—holds a hardline position, accusing China of encroaching on Indian territory and advocating for "reclaiming lost lands by force and containing China." This translates into a realist approach characterized by alternating phases of "containment and cooperation" toward China. In short, the increasingly ideologically colored Modi administration and BJP have imbued India's foreign policy with a growing religious-nationalist undertone. In pursuing global power status, India's traditional hardline stance toward China has been reinforced, laying the ideological foundation for its efforts to alter the status quo and engage in assertive confrontation along the Sino-Indian border. With the advent of the internet era, ordinary citizens' access to information and participation in foreign affairs have increased, amplifying the influence of nationalism and ethnic consciousness on resolving border disputes. Amidst the concurrent rise of nationalism and ethnic consciousness in both nations, both political elites and ordinary citizens increasingly link territory to historical culture or national identity. They perceive defending their country's position on border issues as a crucial manifestation of safeguarding national interests and ethnic dignity. Any significant, substantive concession in border disputes becomes unacceptable, further constricting the decision-making space and diminishing the decision-making capacity of policymakers in both countries regarding border affairs.

The Shaping Role of Geopolitical Interests

From a geopolitical perspective, the relationship between China and India increasingly highlights its unique significance. On one hand, the Sino-Indian border holds strategic importance. Situated between the South Asian subcontinent and East Asia, the border region serves as a vital corridor connecting these two major regions. Arunachal Pradesh, situated on the southern slopes of the Himalayas, is rich in natural resources such as minerals and water. Control over these resources holds significant implications for both nations' economic development and energy security. Dominance in these areas enhances strategic depth and security barriers, directly influencing defense, resource, and security policies for both countries. Tawang in Arunachal is a sacred religious site for Tibetans. For China, its incorporation into India could easily fuel centrifugal forces among the Tibetan population and religious ethnic groups. Aksai Chin, situated close to India's capital and its northwestern economic zone, forms a triangular strategic position with the Indian and Pakistani parts of Kashmir, holding significant military strategic value.

The security dilemma in Sino-Indian relations is gradually shifting from inland frontiers to maritime domains. As this dilemma extends from land borders to the oceans, India will employ various means to block China's access to the Indian Ocean—a move of core geopolitical significance for New Delhi. On October 23, 2024, during the 16th BRICS Summit in Kazan, China and India held their first bilateral meeting in five years. Raghuram Rajan, Chairman of India's National Security Advisory Board (NSAB), stated that China's activities in the Indian Ocean and Eurasia would continue to undermine India's economic and security interests; The strategic competition between the two nations will not subside, leaving India no choice but to strive to establish "guardrails" to prevent Sino-Indian competition from further escalating into confrontation. As two nations aspiring to enhance their regional and global influence, China and India inevitably engage in both competition and

cooperation on bilateral and multilateral issues. The "persistent hostility" between China and India also provides greater strategic maneuvering space for the United States, its allies, and other South Asian nations to implement strategic hedging.

India deepens strategic coordination with the United States and its allies through border disputes. Concerned about China's growing strength and influence, India seeks to further strengthen strategic coordination and security cooperation with the United States and its allies through border disputes, thereby counterbalancing the pressure posed by China. India perceives itself as the undisputed superpower in South Asia. The core of its geopolitical strategy lies in strengthening its land power, dominating the regional affairs landscape in South Asia, and further seeking a more prominent position in global affairs. To this end, India has continuously adjusted its diplomatic strategy—from the "Non-Aligned Movement" to emphasizing its "regional core" status, and from "great power diplomacy" to "new neighborhood diplomacy." India's strategic vision remains anchored in the South Asian heartland. Within this framework, India not only regards its four South Asian neighbors as pivotal factors but also incorporates regions on the subcontinent's periphery—such as Myanmar, China's Tibet, and Afghanistan—into its broader South Asian strategy. This aims to construct a strategic system centered on the Indian subcontinent and radiating outward to surrounding regions, thereby consolidating and expanding its influence in the area.

Border disputes have become a symbol of the power struggle between the two nations. China's rapid rise has disrupted Asia's traditional balance of power. As two major powers both on the rise, China and India both aspire to play a greater role in Asian and global affairs. The historical legacy of border disputes is no longer merely a geographical point of contention; it has evolved into a symbol of the power dynamics between the two nations. For India, leveraging the border dispute not only shifts domestic attention away from economic development challenges but also deepens its strategic partnership with the United States, securing greater international support and security guarantees. For China, maintaining national sovereignty and territorial integrity requires a more steady and pragmatic approach to border issues, preventing U.S. containment through its Indo-Pacific Strategy.

India leverages the U.S.-China rivalry as leverage to secure backing from the United States and its allies, thereby bolstering its image as a major power. For over a decade, India has pursued an external balancing strategy by strengthening its domestic economic, technological, and military capabilities, while forging close partnerships with the United States, its allies and partners in the eastern and western Indian Ocean, and other traditional partners across Eurasia. This approach aims to mitigate and address the widening gap in comprehensive national power between India and China. India's intensified military capability development and strengthened cooperation with the United States and its allies on strategic and security matters will further influence its stance and measures regarding border management. Particularly in responding to

sudden border crises, India has adopted a more proactive and aggressive military posture, while exhibiting reduced strategic patience in both political and military policy, revealing tendencies toward strategic adventurism and military risk-taking.

Section 4 Potential Future Trajectories and Influencing Factors

The future trajectory of China-India relations will be shaped by factors including the resolution of border disputes, bilateral trade relations, and regional security dynamics. While disputes exert pressure on bilateral ties, significant opportunities and mutual needs for cooperation persist in economic and global governance domains. Balancing these cooperative and confrontational elements will be pivotal to the future development of the relationship.

Potential Future Trajectories

Deepening Security Dilemma Along the China-India Land Border

The potential security dilemma along the China-India land border manifests in persistent territorial disputes and a lack of strategic mutual trust. This has trapped both sides in a negative "security-trust" cycle regarding border management, military deployments, and political interactions. The evolution of this dilemma may specifically manifest in the following dimensions:

Firstly, Persistent Reinforcement of Historical Perceptions and Legal Claims Zero-sum game mentality. Since the introduction of the "Line of Actual Control" (LAC) concept in 1959, the Sino-Indian border issue has remained constrained by divergent interpretations of the British-Indian era's "Forward Policy" and China's traditional border claims. Fundamental contradictions persist in both sides' legal interpretations of the 120,000 square kilometer disputed area along the 4,000-kilometer border. Although the "Confidence-Building Measures" (CBMs) framework was established following Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 visit to China, the 2013 Sino-Indian Border Cooperation Agreement failed to effectively address core disputes in Aksai Chin (western sector) and Arunachal Pradesh (southern sector). Consequently, during the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, both sides still relied on 19th-century British survey data to justify territorial claims in certain segments. The land boundary dispute between the two nations has become increasingly prominent, with ongoing contention over geographical control. Currently, twelve major disputed segments exist along the Line of Actual Control in Aksai Chin and South Tibet. This divergence in historical narratives not only provides a mobilization basis for domestic nationalism but also renders any unilateral concession susceptible to interpretation as a permanent surrender of historical rights.

Secondly, strategic mutual distrust over asymmetric military deployments and frontier infrastructure development will intensify the security dilemma. China's deployment of long-range rocket artillery, drone swarms, and area denial systems in plateau regions, coupled with the advancement of a three-dimensional transportation network—including the Sichuan-Tibet Railway and the upgraded G219 National Highway—has reduced campaign-level troop deployment times by 40%. This, combined with the dense deployment of permanent fortifications and early-warning radars, establishes routine surveillance capabilities along the Line of Actual Control. Concurrently, India's procurement of Rafale fighter jets, S-400 air defense systems, and BrahMos missiles has bolstered its defensive capabilities. It has constructed 54 new forward outposts and 12 helicopter landing zones in Arunachal Pradesh, accelerating the "72-Hour Emergency Access Plan" through the Border

Roads Organization (BRO). Both sides' military deployments intensify each other's security anxieties, where any conventional force adjustment risks being misinterpreted as an offensive posture—for instance, India perceives China's observation post at the Hotchen Pass as a tactical pivot to sever supply lines to the Depsang Plain, while China views India's M777 howitzer deployment as a challenge to its control over Pangong Lake waters.

Third, third-party geopolitical maneuvering will amplify the trust deficit. India is deepening defense cooperation with the U.S., Japan, and Australia under its Indo-Pacific Strategy, seeking to leverage external technology transfers to address shortcomings in military modernization. The 2023 U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) further prioritizes hypersonic weapons and artificial intelligence as key cooperation areas. While this "leveraging external forces for counterbalance" strategy enhances India's short-term bargaining power in border standoffs, it may trigger China's "strategic encirclement" anxieties, thereby reinforcing its military presence in disputed border areas. Meanwhile, territorial sovereignty disputes arising from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor traversing Pakistan-administered Kashmir have led India to perceive Sino-Pakistani strategic coordination as a "dual-front threat." This perception has progressively eroded the effectiveness of bilateral border management mechanisms (such as the 1993/1996 agreements). The crisis management approaches during the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash further exposed systemic flaws in existing confidence-building measures when responding to sudden incidents.

Dynamic Evolution of a New Competitive-Cooperative Relationship

China and India share strategic space from the Himalayas to South Asia, Southwest Asia, and Southeast Asia. As disputes over their land borders deepen, the security dilemma between the two nations has gradually spilled over from land to sea, primarily manifesting as strategic counterbalancing in the Indian Ocean and the formation of a new competitive-cooperative relationship.

First, Land-based territorial disputes are permeating into maritime domains through strategic perception mechanisms. India interprets China's port construction in the Indian Ocean—such as Gwadar Port and Hambantota Port—as spatial extensions of the "String of Pearls Strategy". This interpretation has accelerated India's "Maritime Orient" strategy as a countermeasure, with the expansion of its Andaman and Nicobar Islands military bases strategically complementing deepened maritime security cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia. Concurrently, the routine deployment of China's maritime escort fleets and the advancement of the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" initiative have objectively exacerbated strategic distrust. This spillover of land-sea interconnected security challenges essentially represents inevitable territorial collisions during the expansion of both nations' strategic frontiers. In the future, driven by competition over resources and power, the two major powers will increasingly encroach upon each other's maritime spheres of influence. This is partly due to the significant oil and gas reserves and vital international trade routes in the waters between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. It is also

driven by attempts to compel the other to delay or withdraw its deepening and expanding military involvement in the South Asia-Indian Ocean region and along land borders. Consequently, the waters between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea are gradually becoming a battleground for both nations.

Second, maintaining limited cooperation space within a competitive-cooperative framework. Against the backdrop of strategic competition, the two nations face structural geopolitical tensions while also sharing converging interests in areas such as global governance and economic transformation. In global governance, they coordinate policies on climate change negotiations and multilateral financial institution reforms. Regionally, counterterrorism cooperation and joint military exercises under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization provide limited cooperation platforms. Economically, despite significant trade imbalances, industrial complementarities in pharmaceuticals and information technology underpin practical collaboration. This cooperative dynamic in low-politics domains is constrained by insufficient strategic trust, which hinders qualitative breakthroughs, yet it also persists due to shared development aspirations that prevent complete disengagement. This creates a limited cooperative state within a competitive-cooperative framework. Furthermore, amid the uncertainty of the Trump administration's trade policies, China and India may restart economic and trade dialogues, strengthen cooperation in digital infrastructure, pharmaceuticals, and clean energy, and jointly counter the turbulence in the global trade system.

Influencing Factors

Impact of Shifting Strategic Perceptions

Differences in strategic perceptions between China and India are one of the core factors making it difficult to reconcile contradictions in border issues and regional competition. The divergence in strategic perceptions between China and India is one of the core factors making it difficult to reconcile their conflicts over border issues and regional rivalry. India's "Look East Policy" and China's South Asian strategy are not only concrete manifestations of geopolitical competition but also reflect deep mutual suspicion regarding each other's intentions. This misalignment in strategic perceptions has embedded border disputes within a broader strategic framework, intensifying the complexity of resolving these issues.

Following the Cold War, India adopted the "Look East Policy" to break out of economic isolation, prioritizing economic cooperation with Southeast Asian nations and integration into Asia-Pacific industrial chains. After 2014, the Modi administration upgraded it to the "Act East Policy", shifting its focus toward geopolitics and security cooperation. The policy expanded its scope to East Asia (Japan, South Korea) and the Pacific region, strengthening the "Quadrilateral Security Dialogue" with the U.S., Japan, and Australia, and highlighting its "Indo-Pacific Strategy" character. In recent years, India has sought to counterbalance China's influence in the Indian Ocean by simultaneously leveraging the "Act East Policy" to exert counterpressure on China and deepening cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia through the "Indo-Pacific Strategy."

India's core strategic objectives include expanding markets and establishing security counterbalances. Its primary objectives

are: first, expanding markets through regional trade agreements (such as the RCEP negotiations it once participated in) and infrastructure connectivity (e.g., the India-Myanmar-Thailand Highway); second, forming security counterbalances by uniting Southeast Asian nations (like Vietnam and Indonesia) and extra-regional powers to offset China's influence in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea; and third, enhancing India's strategic autonomy as a global power through the "Indo-Pacific" concept.

Tibet, as a vital corridor connecting the Indian subcontinent, holds significant importance for China. It constitutes a crucial component of China's strategic depth, with its stability directly tied to national core interests. As China's overseas interests expand, South Asia has increasingly become a key strategic pivot. China's objectives and strategic arrangements in South Asia can be summarized as follows:

- Maintaining regional peace and stability to prevent large-scale conflicts and wars
- Addressing power imbalances in South Asia, particularly the asymmetry between India and Pakistan
- Consolidating China's land-based strategic advantage over India while maintaining relative stability in bilateral political and economic relations
- Safeguarding maritime route security, primarily against non-traditional threats like piracy and, in extreme cases, traditional security challenges
- Protecting China's interests along the Indian Ocean coastline from severe threats and large-scale disruption
- Enhancing presence in the Indian Ocean through various means, actively participating in international maritime cooperation, and providing global public goods.

The fundamental misalignment in China and India's strategic positioning and strategic perceptions profoundly impacts bilateral relations and diminishes prospects for resolving localized issues. Their respective stances on border disputes reflect not only individual strategic calculations but also reveal broader geopolitical competition.

This deep-seated strategic divergence intensifies the complexity of bilateral challenges and complicates efforts to find mutually acceptable solutions.

Impact of Great Power Competition

The China-India border issue has gradually become embedded within the framework of global great power competition, transforming into a secondary battleground in the strategic rivalry between China and the United States. Through its Indo-Pacific Strategy, the United States has strengthened military cooperation with India and reinforced the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue mechanism, attempting to integrate India into its containment system targeting China. This has indirectly intensified the strategic confrontational nature of the China-India border. India, in turn, leverages this dynamic by adopting a "hedging strategy" on border issues—demonstrating a tough stance through military deployments to appease the United States while maintaining engagement with China through dialogue mechanisms to secure strategic initiative. Key factors and potential trajectories of great power competition are reflected in the following aspects.

Accelerated "NATO-ization" Trends in the Indo-Pacific Region

The accelerating "NATO-ization" of the Indo-Pacific region manifests in frequent political interactions and strengthened military cooperation between the United States and its allies with Indo-Pacific nations, as well as U.S. efforts to promote the "NATO-ization" of the regional alliance system. The U.S. and its allies actively participate in military exercises across the Indo-Pacific, such as the RIMPAC-2022 and Air Guardian 23 joint drills, while enhancing military-technical exchanges through establishing "interoperability platforms." The United States bolsters security cooperation with key Indo-Pacific nations through mechanisms like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) involving the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia, and the AUKUS trilateral security partnership (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States), thereby constructing a strategic containment ring against China. Concurrently, NATO's strategic focus is gradually shifting eastward, with member states like the United Kingdom and France unveiling Indo-Pacific strategies and dispatching naval vessels to conduct military activities in the region. Following the Galwan Valley clash, U.S.-India strategic coordination became overt. In October 2020, the two nations signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement on Geospatial Cooperation (BECA), marking the establishment of a "de facto" military alliance. India seeks to enhance its bargaining power in border negotiations through U.S. cooperation while simultaneously pressuring China.

The accelerated "NATO-ization" of the Indo-Pacific has profoundly impacted the trajectory of Sino-Indian border issues in multiple dimensions. First, it has strengthened India's "external bargaining chips," significantly influencing its strategic choices. The strategic competition between China and the U.S. has led India to perceive a strategic window of opportunity, prompting attempts at strategic hedging between the two powers. Some Indian policy elites argue that the Galwan Valley clash demonstrates the unsustainability of India's China policy—centered on "engagement, deterrence, balancing, hedging, and strengthening capabilities"—calling on the Modi government to adjust its China strategy. India's strategic community views this border standoff as a bellwether for Asia's geopolitical future, hoping to pressure China into concessions through the confrontation. Simultaneously, U.S. support through the Quad framework—including advanced weaponry, satellite intelligence sharing, and joint military exercises—may bolster India's military confidence in border disputes, prompting it to adopt more aggressive "forward policies." The U.S. acceleration of "NATO-ization" in the Indo-Pacific region has intensified the regional security dilemma between China and India. The U.S. designates the Indo-Pacific as a "priority theater," expediting the "Pacific Deterrence Initiative" and vigorously advancing the "Indo-Pacific Maritime Situational Awareness Partnership." It explicitly lists the situations on the Korean Peninsula, in the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea as its "primary security concerns". Through high-frequency, multi-domain military operations with regional allies, partners, and NATO members, the U.S. continuously escalates deterrence intensity. This military engagement deepens the security dilemma in the Indo-Pacific, subjecting the resolution of Sino-Indian border issues to greater external pressure and complicating bilateral dispute resolution. Should India integrate

more deeply into the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific security network, it may be compelled to align with America's containment strategy toward China on border matters, diverting China's strategic resources from the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea through persistent border friction. In response to the Indo-Pacific alliance encirclement, China may accelerate the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) construction, strengthen its stance on the Kashmir issue, and prompt India to allocate more military resources to the western front (India-Pakistan border). This would balance India's influence and indirectly impact border stability.

Enhanced military cooperation and strategic engagement complicate the resolution of Sino-Indian border disputes. As the United States and its allies bolster military presence and strategic collaboration in the Indo-Pacific, these border issues have become not only a core bilateral concern but also part of a broader strategic competition framework. This escalates the risk of direct military confrontation while complicating diplomatic solutions. India leverages external support to bolster its negotiating position, yet simultaneously risks being drawn into broader geopolitical games, further constraining its flexibility in managing border disputes. For China, the challenge lies in safeguarding national sovereignty while avoiding entanglement in an overly tense regional security environment—a complex task.

The Double-Edged Sword of Third-Party Intervention

The involvement of extra-regional powers like the United States and Russia has introduced additional uncertainty into the China-India border issue. The Trump administration attempted to mediate the Sino-Indian dispute, but India explicitly rejected this role, reflecting its heightened sensitivity toward sovereignty issues and commitment to "strategic autonomy." Russia, a partner to both nations, has long supplied arms to India while simultaneously deepening strategic cooperation with China. This balancing act of third-party involvement may constrain the strategic options available to China and India regarding their border issues.

First, the involvement of external major powers has profoundly shaped the complexity and dynamism of the Sino-Indian border dispute through multiple channels, including geopolitical maneuvering and military-technical cooperation. The United States has strengthened military cooperation with India under the framework of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, seeking to integrate India into a secondary system aimed at containing China. The U.S.-India Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement on Geospatial Cooperation provides India with satellite reconnaissance data support, significantly enhancing the Indian military's intelligence advantage in border conflicts and increasing the risk of miscalculation between the two sides. During the 2022 clash at Dongzhang Falls in the western sector of the China-India border, India utilized U.S. intelligence to conduct a precise ambush on a PLA patrol, demonstrating the direct impact of military-technical cooperation.

Russia, meanwhile, has consolidated its traditional ties with India through energy cooperation and arms sales, creating a strategic hedge against China. Russia has long supplied over 60% of India's weapon imports. Equipment like the S-400 air

defense system and T-90MS tanks—designed for extreme cold regions—directly bolster defense along the China-India border. Even after the Russia-Ukraine conflict, India maintained arms purchases via the rupee-ruble settlement mechanism, acquiring an additional 464 T-90 tanks in 2023, which objectively strengthened India's military confidence against China. Additionally, India is Russia's second-largest crude oil buyer, with daily imports reaching 1.9 million barrels in 2024. Both nations have deepened their interdependence through the ruble-rupee settlement mechanism and Arctic shipping route cooperation. This economic entanglement grants Russia unique leverage when mediating Sino-Indian disputes.

Secondly, external powers such as the United States and Russia influence India's China policy through economic interdependence. The Trump administration leveraged tariff reductions to pressure India into reducing its reliance on Russian energy and shifting toward U.S. supplies, a move that indirectly diminished India's flexibility in border negotiations with China. However, data from the Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of India indicates that Sino-Indian economic ties reached a trade volume of \$136.2 billion in 2024. Notably, India's pharmaceutical industry relies on China for 70% of its active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs). This structural dependency curbs India's impulse toward extreme military adventurism. Furthermore, the institutional competition between the U.S.-driven Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and China's Belt and Road Initiative means India's vacillation between the two directly influences its border policy choices. The intervention of external powers fundamentally "de-territorializes" the China-India border issue, transforming it into a bargaining chip for great power rebalancing. The U.S. strategy is to "contain China through India," aiming to drain China's strategic resources by arming India. Russia, meanwhile, pursues a "dynamic equilibrium," leveraging Sino-Indian tensions to sustain its influence in South Asia. This external interference provides India with short-term leverage against China while simultaneously compressing the political space for autonomous Sino-Indian negotiations, trapping the border issue in a vicious cycle of "self-reinforcing security dilemmas." Ultimately, whether China and India can break free from the framework of great power rivalry hinges on their ability to reconstruct the priority of border issues under a "development-first" consensus, redirecting competition toward non-political domains such as infrastructure development and transboundary ecological governance.

Impact of the Sino-Indian Power Balance

The disparity in military, economic, technological, and geostrategic capabilities between China and India profoundly shapes the dynamics of border disputes and conflict management. This power imbalance not only directly influences strategic choices but also exerts indirect effects through domestic political mobilization and international alliances.

Economic Disparity and Economic Interest Considerations

China's rapid economic development has continuously elevated its standing in the global economic landscape. Although India has experienced swift economic growth, it still lags significantly behind China in terms of total economic output and per capita income. This disparity often places India at a relative disadvantage

when engaging in economic cooperation with China. China's government work report indicates that its central fiscal deficit ratio remains below 3%, with foreign exchange reserves of \$3.1 trillion, providing fiscal space for dual-track operations involving military struggles and economic countermeasures. In contrast, India's national debt accounts for 89% of GDP, inflation has persistently exceeded the 6% warning threshold, and the rupee depreciated by 9.2% against the dollar in 2023. Such economic fragility may constrain India's willingness to escalate confrontations. Additionally, 2022 data from China's Ministry of Commerce indicates that while bilateral trade reached \$136.2 billion, India recorded a \$101 billion trade deficit with China, concentrated in strategic goods such as electronic components (37%) and machinery (28%). China's stock of direct investment in India stands at only \$2.3 billion, accounting for 0.6% of India's total FDI. This disparity in economic strength could lead to asymmetric impacts when either side employs economic sanctions as a tool. China could selectively restrict supplies of photovoltaic silicon materials (accounting for 85% of India's imports) and active pharmaceutical ingredient intermediates (68%), while India lacks equivalent countermeasures. This substantial disparity objectively compels India to maintain strategic restraint in border conflicts. India's 2023 reinstatement of the "fast-track approval channel" for Chinese electronics exemplifies how economic rationality constrains security policy.

However, when confronted with specific conflicts, India's high economic dependence on China compels it to adopt a tougher stance on border issues, attempting to offset its relative economic disadvantage through territorial disputes. Some Indian decision-makers seek to link territorial claims with other issues, including economic and technological matters. Citing "national security," they repeatedly investigate companies like Xiaomi, OPPO, and BYD, and MG, or demanding that Chinese investments in India be conducted through joint ventures with Indian companies and that Indian nationals hold senior management positions. These measures aim to exert pressure on China and force concessions, reflecting the ideological entanglement of economic competition and territorial disputes.

Disparities in Military Equipment and Defense Spending

A significant gap exists between China and India in military equipment. China holds a distinct advantage in military equipment R&D and production, while India relies heavily on imports. China has established a clear edge in strategic strike systems, featuring the Dongfeng series of medium-range ballistic missiles, hypersonic weapons, and the Beidou navigation system's global coverage. In contrast, though India possesses the Agni series of missiles, its precision strike system capable of both nuclear and conventional delivery remains underdeveloped. This asymmetric deterrence dynamic has made India more cautious about escalating border conflicts. The decision-making logic behind the Indian military's withdrawal during the 2017 Doklam standoff was partly rooted in a reassessment of China's strategic counterattack capabilities.

Furthermore, a substantial gap exists between China and India in military expenditure. China holds a clear advantage in defense spending, while India allocates relatively less. The 2023 central and local government budget reports indicate China's military budget for 2023 amounted to approximately \$230

billion, representing 1.6% of GDP, with equipment procurement accounting for 41% of this expenditure.

Meanwhile, International Monetary Fund (IMF) data indicates India's military spending for the same period was \$76 billion, representing 2.4% of GDP, with personnel maintenance costs consuming 58% of the budget. This disparity may fuel India's "security anxieties" regarding border issues, prompting increased arms purchases from the United States and Russia to balance the gap and compensate for its relative military disadvantage.

In the short term, the military gap may prompt India to adopt an opportunistic strategy, seeking breakthroughs in military technology. In the medium to long term, China's ongoing push toward military intelligence transformation—projected by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute to elevate the PLA's advanced equipment ratio to 65% by 2030 may drive border issues toward a "competition in management" model. This shift could see both sides transition from pure territorial disputes to multifaceted competition encompassing technical standards, support systems, and strategic endurance, thereby fostering new flexibility in establishing military trust mechanisms and demarcating buffer zones. This shift could either compel both sides to establish a new stability framework due to power imbalances or trigger miscalculation risks stemming from divergent perceptions. Its ultimate trajectory hinges on whether the two nations can find a dynamic equilibrium between military capability development and crisis management [1-24].

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