

Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on
“India, China, and the Balance of Power in the Indo-Pacific”

Panel I: Enduring Challenges and Potential Flashpoints in China-India Relations

“The Evolving China-India Military Balance”

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Co-Chairs Brands and Stivers, distinguished Commissioners, and Commission staff, thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing on "India, China, and the Balance of Power in the Indo-Pacific." It is an honor to be here alongside esteemed experts on this panel.

My testimony today will focus principally on aspects of the evolving China-India military balance, China's military posture on the disputed land border with India and the Indian Ocean, Indian threat assessments of China, and the military dynamics of some potential Indo-Pacific conflict scenarios. I will draw in part on my previous research as well as recent testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

I've structured my testimony around the questions put forward by the commission staff to address the following topics:

- The enduring asymmetry of interests between India and China;
- The persistent threat on the China-India border;
- Potential pathways to conflict (including a Dalai Lama succession process);
- Lessons India drew from the May 2025 India-Pakistan conflict that shape its threat perceptions of the China-Pakistan axis, and shape its defense posture;
- China's political and security inroads into the Indian Ocean and the threat they pose to India's security interests;
- India's stakes in Taiwan and how India could respond in a cross-Strait conflict contingency; and
- Recommendations for Congress.

For your convenience, I have tried to summarize my testimony into seven arguments that encapsulate each section:

1. Despite efforts to bring the temperature down due to uncertainty, India will continue to regard China as an adversary and remain locked in competition with China due to territorial, political, economic, and technological concerns.
2. The China-India border remains highly militarized and the military balance favors China, which continues to build up its advantages in logistics and firepower, even while India tries to catch up.
3. Despite the modicum of stability after disengagement of forces from face-off points, the China-India border remains tense enough that a political crisis—including a Dalai Lama succession crisis—could inadvertently or deliberately escalate into a large-scale conventional conflict.
4. The May 2025 war exposed to India several of its own capability gaps, which it is seeking to remedy, as well as the density of the "two-front" threat posed by the China-Pakistan axis, which may demand a new Indian offset strategy.
5. China's substantial inroads into the Indian Ocean—including growing PLAN surface combatant capability, access points, and increasing naval presence—have eroded India's

resident advantages. While India's naval capabilities have faltered, there are emerging signs of a turnaround.

6. New Delhi's stakes in Taiwan's security are rising, and in the event of a cross-Strait conflict, India has the potential to make meaningful military contributions to help deter a conflict around the first island chain and support a coalitional defense of Taiwan.
7. To ensure greater military balancing of China, Congress should take several steps to bolster the US-India defense partnership and Indian deterrence capacities.

1. China-India Interest Asymmetry

The China-India relationship is increasingly defined by asymmetric and conflictual strategic interests, a reality underscored by a deep-seated distrust that spans the military, diplomatic, and technological domains. Assessments of a rapprochement are overstated.¹ Conflicting interests are not a temporary friction, but a persistent state driven by fundamental tensions over border disputes, adversarial behavior, competition for regional influence, and economic and technological coercion.

Border tensions. A primary driver of this conflict is the ongoing territorial dispute along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). China's 2020 military mobilizations and the resulting lethal clashes in the Galwan Valley severely ruptured relations and any political trust. Despite partial military disengagement in the fall of 2024, India has seen no progress toward its required benchmarks for de-escalation, including the full pullback and de-induction over 60,000 troops that New Delhi sent to the border to strengthen its position along the LAC and counter Chinese territorial encroachment. China's continued military buildups and aggressive posturing in the Western theater continue to fuel distrust between the two powers.

Arming adversaries. Strategic interests further diverge due to China's material and direct support of Pakistan. Beijing's role has shifted from background support to actively arming, training, and wiring Pakistani military capabilities, which are then used to target India. This all-weather alliance effectively creates a two-front security challenge for India, cementing the view of China as a direct adversary and enabler of regional aggression, despite economic ties.²

Economic coercion. While India continues to maintain a robust trading relationship with China, this economic relationship is both imbalanced and at times coercive. Imbalanced trade creates a hefty trade deficit of over \$100 billion for India.³ Historically, Beijing has leveraged its control of critical goods and minerals to coerce India, fueling Indian discontent and skepticism. India's

¹ Sameer Lalwani, "Has the United States Really Lost India?" German Marshall Fund, September 15, 2025, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/has-united-states-really-lost-india>.

² Sameer Lalwani, Shailender Arya, and David Brostoff, "Deep Learning From Operation Sindoor: Five Takeaways From a Four-Day War," *War on the Rocks*, January 22, 2026, <https://warontherocks.com/2026/01/deep-learning-from-operation-sindoor-five-takeaways-from-a-four-day-war/>.

³ "India-China Trade: India's Exports to China Rise in 2025, Deficit Climbs to Record \$116 Bn," *The Times of India*, January 14, 2026, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/india-china-trade-indias-exports-to-china-rise-in-2025-deficit-climbs-to-record-116-bn/articleshow/126530984.cms>.

re-engagement with China, including Prime Minister Modi's visit to Tianjin for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in August 2025, was motivated in part to relieve Chinese coercive pressure stunting Indian economic growth. Beijing has weaponized critical supplies and components for India's growth through restrictions on the exports of rare-earth magnets and minerals, specialized fertilizers, and tunnel-boring machines.⁴ This has harmed Indian farmers, the automotive industry, and crucial infrastructure projects. China has also restricted the flow of Chinese engineers and technicians to Apple supplier Foxconn's new Indian production facilities, impeding the growth of India's electronics manufacturing.⁵

Distrust of China's tech stack. Finally, there is a profound fear that China will weaponize Indian dependence or even use of its advanced information and communications technology for surveillance, coercion, and disruption purposes. Indian leaders explicitly distrust China's "technology stack". While India remains dependent on China for battery technology and rare earths, the government has sought to prevent Chinese companies from embedding themselves into the nation's critical digital infrastructure—including telecom carriers, data centers, artificial intelligence, social media (TikTok), and smart city technology.⁶ By resisting the deployment of China's digital infrastructure and services, India seeks to avoid a future where its economic and social data can be leveraged for political or economic coercion.

2. The China-India Border

The China-India border remains highly militarized post-disengagement, and the military balance significantly favors China, which continues to build up its advantages in logistics and firepower, even while India tries to catch up.

Limits of the October 2024 Disengagement

Despite a thaw in India-China relations in fall 2024, risks persist and China's posed threat to India on the disputed border continues to rise. The initial disengagement process was limited and narrow, never evolving into greater stability or trust.

⁴ Pranab Dhal Samanta, "China Lifts Curbs on Fertilizers, Rare Earths & Tunnel Boring Machines to India," *The Economic Times*, August 19, 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/china-lifts-curbs-on-fertilizers-rare-earths-tunnel-boring-machines-to-india/articleshow/123377378.cms>.

⁵ Sankalp Phartiyal, Shruti Srivastava, and Debby Wu, "China Moves to Stall Apple, BYD Production Shifts in Asia," *Bloomberg*, January 17, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-01-17/china-moves-to-stall-apple-byd-production-shifts-across-asia>.

⁶ Tanvi Madan, "India Doesn't Want to Need China," *Foreign Affairs*, September 24, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/india-doesnt-want-need-china>; Danish Khan, "Improving India-China Ties Unlikely to Bring Immediate Relief to Huawei and ZTE," *Moneycontrol*, September 3, 2025, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/technology/improving-india-china-ties-unlikely-to-bring-immediate-relief-to-huawei-and-zte-article-13516766.html>.

In October 2024, China and India announced an agreement to pull back troops and reduce tensions on the disputed border that had seen increased confrontation since 2020.⁷ The announced “disengagement” appeared to involve the pull back of Indian and Chinese troops and dismantlement of temporary infrastructure (e.g., tents and sheds) in Depsang and Demchok, two areas of the disputed border region near Ladakh. This follows previous disengagements in five other disputed parts of Ladakh over the past two years, which have resulted in buffer zones within what India perceives as its territory. This served to provide a modicum of stability equivalent to “guardrails” to prevent unintentional crises.

In these two latest disengagements, India announced additional progress in the form of an agreement on coordinated patrolling arrangements to reduce the risk of confrontations and clashes and the restoration of access to at least some patrolling points denied to India since 2020. India’s External Affairs Minister said disengagement of these forward positions was the first step, with future drawdowns to reduce the wider threat environment.⁸

Indian officials expected this initial disengagement—or pull back of a few kilometers from face-off points—to yield lead to a wider “de-escalation” involving a mutual, further pull back of forces to designated areas that are at some distance from the disputed border, along with protocols to prevent re-engagement.⁹ Following that, India then aspired to a removal or “de-induction” of forces down to a mutually agreed upon level, potentially reverting back to the pre-April 2020 regional force deployments that existed before India added up to 60,000 troops and China perhaps 20,000 to the disputed border, alongside substantial military materiel and infrastructure.¹⁰

However, these subsequent measures never took shape. One year later, there has been no actual de-escalation on the ground or substantial reduction of the overall massed forward troop deployments beyond the specific October 2024 disengagement areas. The prospect for de-escalation and de-induction was “still nowhere on the horizon” according to official Indian sources.¹¹ Post-agreement reporting indicates both armies remain forward deployed at

⁷ Krishn Kaushik, Fayaz Bukhari and Shilpa Jamkhandikar, “India, China Reach Pact to Resolve Border Conflict, Indian Foreign Minister Says,” *Reuters*, October 21, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/india-china-have-arrived-border-patrolling-pact-indias-top-diplomat-says-2024-10-21/>.

⁸ “Disengagement in Depsang and Demchok First Step, De-escalation Next: EAM Jaishankar on India-China Ties,” *The Hindu*, October 27, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/disengagement-in-depsang-and-demchok-first-step-de-escalation-next-eam-jaishankar-on-india-china-ties/article68803007.ece>.

⁹ Vijay Gokhale “Stabilizing the Border: A Possible Way Ahead in the Post-Galwan Situation,” *Carnegie India*, December 15, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/12/stabilizing-the-border-a-possible-way-ahead-in-the-post-galwan-situation>.

¹⁰ “China Warns That Increasing Indian Troops at Border Won’t Ease Tensions,” *The Economic Times*, March 8, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/china-warns-that-increasing-indian-troops-at-border-wont-ease-tensions/articleshow/108322514.cms?from=mdr>; Dennis J. Blasko, “A Baseline Assessment of the PLA Army’s Border Reinforcement Operations in the Aksai Chin,” *US Army War College - Strategic Studies Institute*, April 9, 2024, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Article/3735300/a-baseline-assessment-of-the-pla-armys-border-reinforcement-operations-in-the-a/>.

¹¹ “India, China Hold Talks Again, but De-Escalation Far Off on Ground,” *The Times of India*, October 30, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-china-hold-talks-again-but-de-escalation-far-off-on-ground/articleshow/124922210.cms>.

generally pre-October 2024 levels, despite some seasonal variation.¹² Meanwhile, India still does not have patrolling access to the buffer zones, which India considers its own territory.

Expansion and hardening of PLA border presence

China has been expanding its military presence on the border near the LAC by building a number of new bases and facilities, hardening them for a more intensive operational environment. This includes accelerating its buildup of airpower infrastructure and logistics in its Western theater since the 2017 and 2020 broader standoffs with India.¹³ A meaningful thaw in security tensions between China and India might have produced a slowdown in these developments, but instead the pace quickened. Despite disengagement, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) has upgraded its military infrastructure along the India-China border and Tibetan plateau to enhance its power projection capabilities and capacity to coerce India.

The construction and enhancement of air bases in Tibet and near the LAC suggest the PLA's pursuit of dominance, not parity, on the border with India. China has built, expanded, and modernized a network of 16 "dual-use" facilities and airfields in Tibet—half of which are close to the contested border with several less than 25 miles away. This network could serve as frontline bases to deploy fighter jets, helicopters, reconnaissance and attack drones, and even heavy bombers.¹⁴ These facilities are undoubtedly oriented for conventional conflict rather than internal security duties. At one of the actual 2020 contested border sites near Pangong Lake, the PLA is constructing a new air defense complex with hardened shelters for HQ-9 air defense units, right across from Indian air fields.¹⁵ Additionally, the Pentagon's China Military Power Reports suggest that the number of missile brigades in the Western Theater Command has more than doubled from four in 2020 to nine in 2025.¹⁶

Even after the October 2024 disengagement, China expanded and upgraded this new network of air bases in Tibet to increase its operational reach and readiness on the LAC.¹⁷ Throughout 2025, the PLA continued to build up its air base in Lhunzee, only 70 miles from the Tibetan spiritual site of Tawang. The Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which includes Tawang, has long

¹² Manoj Kewalramani, "Between Rivalry and Rapprochement: The Trials and Trajectory of India-China Relations," *FULCRUM*, January 29, 2026, <https://fulcrum.sg/between-rivalry-and-rapprochement-the-trials-and-trajectory-of-india-china-relations/>.

¹³ Brian Hart, "How Is China Expanding Its Infrastructure to Project Power Along Its Western Borders?," ChinaPower Project, March 16, 2022, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-tibet-xinjiang-border-india-military-airport-heliport/>.

¹⁴ Niharika Mandhana, Josh Chin, and Camille Bressange, "Chinese Forces Battle Dizzying Altitudes to Expand Military Footprint," *Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/china/chinese-forces-battle-dizzying-altitudes-to-expand-military-footprint-c9350bbd>.

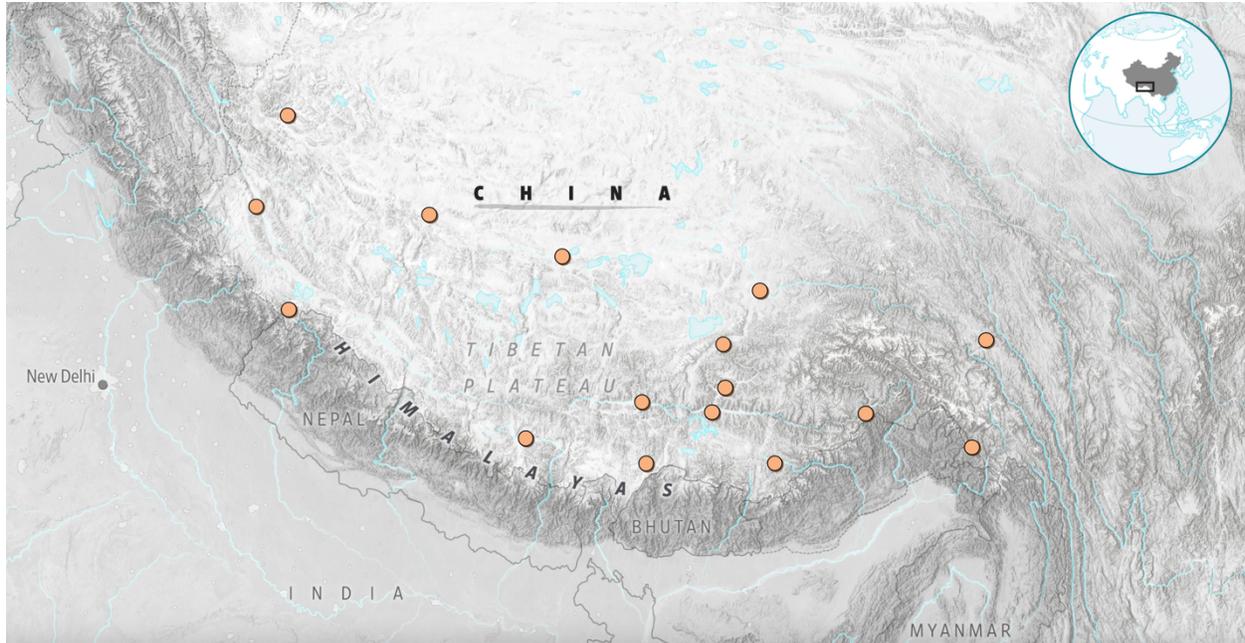
¹⁵ Ankit Kumar, "China Builds New Air Defence Site near India Border, Satellite Images Reveal," *India Today*, October 24, 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/china-builds-new-air-defence-site-near-india-border-satellite-images-reveal-retractable-missile-shelters-2807706-2025-10-24>.

¹⁶ Total missile brigades has risen from 29 to 47 in this period. See Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2025*, Annual Report to Congress, released on December 23, 2025.

¹⁷ Vishnu Som and Divyam Sharma, "Exclusive - 6 Airbases, 1 Big Move: China's Play Against India," *NDTV*, October 24, 2025, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/exclusive-6-airbases-1-big-move-chinas-play-against-india-8225899>.

been considered a target of future PLA military operations as China reaffirms its claims in the territory, even a few months ago, as its own Southern Tibet.¹⁸

Figure 1: New or Upgraded Air Bases in Tibet¹⁹



Air Chief Marshal (Ret.) B.S. Dhanoa, the former head of the Indian Air Force, has suggested that this buildup and remedying of the PLA Air Force's (PLAAF) deployment problem in Tibet is a prelude to war. He recently explained:

“Construction of 36 hardened aircraft shelters at Lhunze clearly indicates that during the next incident, their tactical fighters and attack helicopters operating in support of their army would be based in Lhunze...The PLAAF's (People's Liberation Army Air Force) problem in Tibet is not aircraft but deployment...The day [the PLAAF] start building hardened aircraft shelters in their airfields in Tibet would mean that they would be preparing for a war with us. Their key vulnerability in Tibet would get removed,”²⁰

Although China has numerous advantages on the LAC, one disadvantage the country faces is the difficulty of air operations conducted from the high-altitude bases of the Tibetan plateau. At very high altitudes, lower air density makes jet engines take longer to ignite and constrains

¹⁸ Anirban Bhaumik, “Arunachal Dispute: India Slams China’s Renaming Bid as ‘Preposterous,’” *Deccan Herald*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/not-all-quiet-on-eastern-front-china-renames-27-places-in-indias-arunachal-to-re-assert-claim-3539662>.

¹⁹ Mandhana, et. al., “Chinese Forces Battle Dizzying Altitudes to Expand Military Footprint”.

²⁰ Vishnu Som, “Exclusive: India’s Latest China Headache: 36 Hardened Aircraft Shelters Near Arunachal,” *NDTV*, October 27, 2025, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/exclusive-china-builds-36-aircraft-shelters-40-km-from-arunachal-border-9523393>.

fighter aircraft to lighter payloads.²¹ However, dual-use airbases very close to the border, like Lhunze, enable PLAAF jets to launch with lighter fuel loads, increasing their weapons capacity.

Besides airpower, China has expanded logistics for deployment and rapid movement of ground troops. While terrain and altitude can slow mountain warfare,²² China designed a lattice of infrastructure to compress mobilization timelines and afford it a first-mover advantage. Former Northern Army Commander LTG D.S. Hooda (Retd.) assessed that the expansion of weatherized habitation facilities for year-round deployment of personnel in the Western sector of the LAC supports "the PLA's ability to rapidly launch military operations across the LAC," including on Indian targets it attacked in the 1962 war.²³ The construction and upgrade of hundreds of "Xiaokang" border villages along the LAC in Tibet act as permanent surveillance nodes and barracks, allowing already acclimatized PLA forces to move from "civilian" to "combat" status in hours.²⁴ Some PLA helipad construction is ongoing as close as 20 miles of Eastern sector border crossings for potential rapid ingress of troops.²⁵ High-altitude heliports enable the PLA to bypass ridges and land air assault brigades behind Indian defensive lines.

Aggressive posturing

In addition to massive military logistics developments, China has recently postured more aggressively in the region, signaling China's ability to rapidly mobilize and sustain forces in contested zones. In January 2025, in the middle of the Himalayan winter, and months after the October disengagement, China conducted reconnaissance tactical combat drills in an unfamiliar high-altitude area of over 2,800 meters, reinforcing its military focus on operational readiness and logistics support in extreme conditions. A brigade of the 76th Group Army under the Xinjiang Military Command led a full-staff, full-equipment deployment exercise at a training base, simulating actual combat scenarios involving reconnaissance, artillery, and armored units. This exercise featured advanced military technology, including all-terrain vehicles, unmanned systems, drones, and exoskeletons designed to enhance soldier mobility and endurance to overcome the physiological challenges of high-altitude warfare.²⁶

Closer to the border, China also deployed more advanced firepower. In November 2025, and for the first time ever, China forward stationed four H-6 heavy bombers to Hotan, 160 miles from

²¹ Iskander Rehman, "A Himalayan Challenge," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 70, No. 1, Winter 2017, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol70/iss1/6>.

²² Aidan Milliff, "Tension High, Altitude Higher: Logistical and Physiological Constraints on the Indo-Chinese Border," *War on the Rocks*, June 8, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/tension-high-altitude-higher-logistical-and-physiological-constraints-on-the-indo-chinese-border/>.

²³ Vishnu Som, "Exclusive: New Chinese Settlement Near LAC Has Roads, Power Transformers," *NDTV*, March 4, 2025, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/exclusive-new-chinese-settlements-near-lac-has-roads-power-transformers-7844066>.

²⁴ "China Is Upgrading Dual-Use Villages along Its Disputed Indian Border," *ChinaPower Project*, May 16, 2024, <https://chinapower.csis.org/analysis/china-upgrading-dual-use-xiaokang-villages-india-border/>.

²⁵ Damien Symon (@detresfa_), "A likely helicopter facility is under construction north of the Bum La border crossing, in Cona County - a PLA strongpoint, this facility could trim troop transit times," X, October 3, 2025, https://x.com/detresfa_/status/1973968755614011614.

²⁶ Shivani Sharma, "China Conducts Drills near LAC in Eastern Ladakh, Indian Forces on Alert: Sources," *India Today*, January 13, 2025, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/china-conducts-combat-exercises-near-lac-indian-border-forces-on-alert-2663837-2025-01-13>; "PLA Army Carries out Drills to Test Operational Capacity in High-Altitude and Cold Environment Conditions," *China News*, January 7, 2025, <https://www.ecns.cn/news/military/2025-01-07/detail-ihemrznk1742674.shtml>.

the Indian border while India was conducting a large, two-week tri-service exercise.²⁷ Analysts have noted that the particular method of combat aircraft deployment in Tibet at various points in 2025 suggests increasing operational readiness.²⁸

China's Advantages

Despite India's expansion and modernization of its capabilities on the border for over a decade – and that this is China's "secondary strategic direction", with the bulk of its attention, resources, and capabilities directed east²⁹– India is still at a significant military disadvantage on the India-China border.

China possesses the obvious structural advantages of size, including its economy, its military, its defense budget, and its industrial capacity. It also possesses a terrain advantage in that its forces are positioned on the Tibetan plateau, acclimatized to the altitude, and must move across flat terrain while Indian forces have to maneuver up substantial altitude gradients. Besides the disadvantages of terrain, the most crucial part of the disputed India-China border in India's northeast connects to the Indian mainland via a vulnerable 14-mile wide strip of land, the Siliguri corridor. In wartime, Chinese air, missile, and ground attack could easily sever this vital line of communication, choking off Indian flows of manpower and materiel.³⁰

Related, China possesses a mobilization advantage due to superior logistics and infrastructure. While India is attempting to catch up, China has spent two decades building a dense network of all-weather roads, railways, airfields, pipelines, and logistics hubs linking the frontiers of Tibet and Xinjiang to each other and the region's interior.³¹ This enables China to surge troops into the theater to concentrate force quickly. It also affords the PLA faster lateral troop movement between sectors to sustain high-tempo operations at altitude.

When it comes to capabilities, the PLA possesses better cyber, space, electronic warfare, and air power capabilities, as well as more modernized and integrated command and control and ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance) networks. It also possesses deeper munitions stockpiles and manufacturing capacity.

One area deserving greater attention is China's long-range precision fire and missile dominance that could potentially enable Beijing to wage war on India without having to transfer additional forces from outside of the Western Theater Command. The PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) fields a

²⁷ Christopher Biggers, "Chinese Bombers Deployed to Hotan during Recent Indian Exercises," *Janes*, December 19, 2025, <https://www.janes.com/osint-insights/defence-news/defence/chinese-bombers-deployed-to-hotan-during-recent-indian-exercises>.

²⁸ Damien Symon (@detresfa_), "For the first time combat aircraft are visible at the newly developed military section of Ngari Gunga airport in Tibet, while fighters & Y-20's are not new to the airport," X, May 18, 2025, https://x.com/detresfa_/status/1924066209009475972.

²⁹ M. Taylor Fravel, "Stability in a Secondary Strategic Direction: China and the Border Dispute with India After 1962," *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations*, Eds. Kanti Bajpai, Selina Ho, and Manjari Chatterjee Miller, New York: Routledge, 2020.

³⁰ Christopher Clary, "Is India Underbalancing China?" *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 48 (4), 2025: 874–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2025.2486085>.

³¹ Brian Hart, "How Is China Expanding Its Infrastructure to Project Power Along Its Western Borders?," ChinaPower Project, March 16, 2022, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-tibet-xinjiang-border-india-military-airport-heliport/>.

large inventory of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles capable of striking Indian airbases, logistics hubs, and infrastructure deep behind the front.³² PLARF conventional missiles can also range India's industrial and political centers of gravity, while India cannot respond in kind. India has explored the prospect of an integrated rocket force for conventional tactical strike missions but to date, it remains "theoretical".³³ India has developed short-range ballistic missiles like the Pralay, which may soon get inducted into its military, but it will take some time for India to build up to the scale and rate of missile production to offset China's advantage.

The PLA's long-range rocket artillery also poses a problem for India. China's PCL-191 multiple launch rocket systems provide a cost-effective, long-range precision strike option that extends well beyond traditional artillery, similar to the US M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS).³⁴ The system can be stationed deep within the Tibetan Plateau—safe from Indian mountain guns—and rain precision-guided rockets on Indian entrenched positions 300-500km away in large volumes at a rapid pace. By contrast, India is currently operating with multiple launch rocket systems with a maximum range of 75km. This creates a standoff strike advantage that could complicate Indian mobilization and air operations. Extensive deployment of China's rocket artillery would be able to range every Indian airfield and threaten all Indian Army bases around the LAC.

In April 2021, China reportedly deployed the PCH-191 long-range rocket artillery system near the border in the midst of the crisis and tested it in intensive combat training drills in Xinjiang at 17,000 feet.³⁵ While American analysts have principally worried about the employment of this system in a PLA military campaign against Taiwan, there are some Chinese analysts who assess it would be "more capable when it's deployed at high altitude, with its maximum range having been extended several times".³⁶

If I may offer a personal anecdote, almost two years ago I played a multi-day wargame involving a major India-China conventional conflict, which made apparent China's significant military advantages. After a conflict broke out on the border, the China team was able to significantly degrade forward-deployed Indian forces, capture critical Indian territory beyond the disputed border, generate a high rate of strikes against India's ground lines of communication to the border, and seal off the battlefield from Indian ground reinforcements. Indian sortie generation in the region fell below 50% and several airfields were degraded to become combat ineffective.

³² Veerle Nouwens, et. al, "Long-Range Strike Capabilities in the Asia-Pacific: Implications for Regional Stability," International Institute for Strategic Studies, January 2024, https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2024/01/iiss_long-range-strike-capabilities-in-the-asia-pacific_implications-for-regional-stability_012024.pdf

³³ Kartik Bommakanti, "The PLARF Challenge: Why India's Integrated Rocket Force Cannot Wait," Observer Research Foundation, October 8, 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-plarf-challenge-why-india-s-integrated-rocket-force-cannot-wait>.

³⁴ Joshua Arostegui, "China Maritime Report No. 32: The PCH191 Modular Long-Range Rocket Launcher: Reshaping the PLA Army's Role in a Cross-Strait Campaign" (2023). CMSI China Maritime Reports. 32. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/32>

³⁵ Minnie Chan, "China Deploys Long-Range Rocket Launcher 'as Deterrent to India,'" *South China Morning Post*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3130179/china-deploys-long-range-rocket-launcher-deterrent-india>.

³⁶ Michael Evans, "China Tests New Rocket Launcher near Disputed Border with India," *The Sunday Times* July 19, 2022, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/asia/article/china-tests-new-rocket-launcher-near-disputed-border-with-india-v723v9c05>.

China's winning strategy in this game stemmed in large part from its overwhelming short-range ballistic missile power as well as long-range rocket artillery systems, which disrupted, degraded, and destroyed India's forward network of roads, airfields, and tunnels. The Indian team had no effective counter for this.

In short, significant risks persist on the border, despite not being on hair-trigger alert after disengagement. China may find it strategically useful to maintain this "noose"³⁷ around India's neck, which traps the country into unsustainably costly deployments in brutal frontier terrain and diverts its resources and attention from the maritime domain.

3. Potential Pathways to Conflict (Including a Dalai Lama Succession Crisis)

Deterrence between China and India could break down in several ways, including a succession crisis after the passing of 14th Dalai Lama, resulting on a major conventional conflict.

Inadvertent or Deliberate Escalation

There are several plausible scenarios for how India and China could become embroiled in a larger conventional conflict. PLA gray zone incursions and salami slicing tactics in pursuit of a *fait accompli* on the disputed border have become more frequent on the LAC—as we saw in 2017 in Doklam, 2020 in Galwan, and in 2022 in Yangtse—which could result in real clashes that inadvertently or deliberately escalate into limited conventional war. The India-China border conflict does not lend itself easily to rapid nuclear escalation dynamics as is thought to be the case in the India-Pakistan dyad.³⁸ However, there are still pathways to significant inadvertent conventional escalation if one side fails to anticipate the escalatory effects of a chosen action and crosses an unforeseen threshold. For instance, opening fire on opposing forces, as reportedly took place in 2020, might vertically escalate a gray-zone face-off to a conventional conflict.³⁹ Similarly, in a conventional conflict, conducting military strikes outside of what the opponent believes to be the acceptable contested zone of the LAC—such as India interdicting China's logistics network in Tibet, or leveraging irregular assets to attack a military's rear echelons—might also precipitate horizontal escalation.⁴⁰

Either side might choose to deliberately escalate as well. Both sides' political and reputational stakes or fear of rapid, dramatic material losses could motivate either to horizontally and vertically escalate, resulting in a bloody, expanded, and extended war. Some scholars have observed that China places immense importance on seizing the initiative which could involve a

³⁷ Gokhale, "Stabilizing the Border: A Possible Way Ahead in the Post-Galwan Situation."

³⁸ Ashley J. Tellis, *Striking Asymmetries: Nuclear Transitions in Southern Asia*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022, pp. 195-196, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/research/2022/07/striking-asymmetries-nuclear-transitions-in-southern-asia>.

³⁹ Snehes Alex Philip, "August 29-30, 2020: Inside details of how Indian Army surprised China at Rechin La & PLA 'Blinked First'," *The Print*, February 4, 2026, <https://theprint.in/defence/august-29-30-2020-inside-details-of-how-indian-army-surprised-china-at-rechin-la-pla-blinked-first/2833141/>.

⁴⁰ Lt Gen Gautam Banerjee, "India's Military Strategy Vis a Vis China," Vivekananda International Foundation, July 15, 2013, <https://www.vifindia.org/print/1828>.

particular premium on rapid reaction and mobilization if something goes wrong. China might mobilize its forces to intimidate India like it did in 2020 but if this fails or something goes wrong – for instance China incurs unexpected levels of resistance, setbacks, or losses – it might pursue rapid escalation dominance. Scholars argue, “China’s commitment to gaining the initiative as part of war control could precipitate the very opposite outcome: uncontrolled and rapid escalation.”⁴¹

Most Indian analysts and officials discount the prospect of a large-scale conventional war with China. One Indian analyst has argued that “India might be falling prey to the same level of deception as before that China in contemporary parlance would restrict itself to ‘grey-zone operations’ or the odd skirmish and intrusion throughout the Sino-Indian boundary and will not pursue an all-out war or a substantial attack.”⁴²

It is worth at least considering how China might choose to wage a larger scale conventional offensive on India to seize disputed territory, such as sections of Ladakh, Sikkim, or Arunachal Pradesh. Combined with any nominal provocation, several motives could incentivize China to war. China might desire to teach India a lesson and demonstrate the dangers of its alignment with the United States, to seize a window of opportunity to settle the border on China’s terms before Indian military modernization closes the conventional gap, or to test out new military capabilities and command and control structures in an easier land campaign (rather than amphibious assault) against a single non-aligned adversary.

A Dalai Lama Succession Crisis

One scenario that might precipitate a major conventional conflict between India and China—whether through deliberate or inadvertent means—is a succession crisis after the passing of the 14th Dalai Lama.

Former Foreign Secretary and leading China expert, Amb. Vijay Gokhale has described the Dalai Lama’s succession in Tibet as a “future quagmire.”⁴³ Following the Dalai Lama’s passing, India will be forced to make several choices that are likely to draw the interest and ire of China including: issues of recognition, mediation with China, how to handle the 14th Dalai Lama’s mortal remains, and how to deal with backlash by the Tibetan community in India or Chinese interference.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Forrest E. Morgan, Karl P. Mueller, Evan S. Medeiros, Kevin L. Pollpeter, and Roger Cliff, *Dangerous Thresholds Managing Escalation in the 21st Century*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008, p. 57, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG614.html>.

⁴² Kartik Bommakanti, "China's Massive Attack Against India: A Looming Possibility," *Observer Research Foundation*, June 17, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/china-s-massive-attack-against-india-a-looming-possibility>.

⁴³ Vijay Gokhale, “The Next Dalai Lama: Preparing for Reincarnation and Why It Matters to India,” *Carnegie India*, November 11, 2024, p. 19, <https://w.carnegieendowment.org/india/research/2024/12/the-next-dalai-lama-preparing-for-reincarnation-and-why-it-matters-to-india>.

⁴⁴ Gokhale, 2024

Certainly, if the Indian government opts for a more assertive posture to back the Tibetan cause for leverage as some Indian analysts have argued, this risks spiraling into conflict.⁴⁵ In the event of a dual succession crisis where China anoints a successor but the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (in India) recognizes another—possibly even from India—this could be perceived as a subversive act and direct challenge to the "One China" policy. China could issue an ultimatum to the Indian government, and if not met, launch a military operation to either capture the other Dalai Lama or simply punish India.

As an alternative pathway to conflict before decisions of recognition are made, mobilization or protests by Tibetans in Tibet or in exile in India could drag both sides into a conflict. Tibetan protests and unrest might trigger military mobilizations and deployments by either China or India intended as a defensive or precautionary measure. However, these could easily be read by the other side as acts of hostility or opportunistic aggression, triggering counter-mobilization and a classic conflict escalation spiral.

In either scenario, Indian analysts warn that India needs to anticipate “more heightened aggression” and “further military clashes” from China.⁴⁶ A military clash, even one that starts small, might afford China the pretext to escalate and finally wrest control of Tawang—the birthplace of the 6th Dalai Lama and a holy shrine for Tibetan pilgrims—and larger parts of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as Southern Tibet.

4. Indian Lessons from the May 2025 India-Pakistan Conflict

The May 2025 war exposed to India several capability gaps, which it is seeking to remedy, as well as the dense nature of the two-front threat posed by the China-Pakistan axis.

The conflict first revealed several Indian capability deficiencies that allowed Pakistan to punch above its weight and fight India to a perceived “draw.” These included air defense and counter-drone systems; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); resilient communications in a contested electromagnetic spectrum; sensor-to-shooter speed; and long-range strike. These problems were exposed in the fight with Pakistan, but the Indian strategic establishment recognized that these deficiencies would prove devastating vulnerabilities in a fight with China. Consequently, New Delhi has embarked on a significant effort to remedy these deficiencies with a slew of new investments and acquisitions as well as broader organizational reforms in defense acquisitions, theater commands, and civil-military fusion to address the gaps.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Editorial, “The Tibet Play,” *Times of India*, June 21, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-editorials/the-tibet-play-2/>.

⁴⁶ Preeti Khenta and Sriparna Pathak, “Dalai Lama Succession: The Next Spark in the India-China Power Game,” Usanas Foundation, July 11, 2025, <https://usanasfoundation.com/dalai-lama-succession-the-next-spark-in-the-india-china-power-game>.

⁴⁷ Lalwani et. al., “Deep Learning From Operation Sindoor.”

The most significant pivot in Indian strategic thinking since the May conflict is the transition from a theoretical two-front threat to a tangible reality. Many strategists in New Delhi are now convinced that it no longer faces two separate adversaries, but a “one-front reinforced” threat characterized by deep, active cooperation between China and Pakistan.⁴⁸

Since the 1950s, Indian planners have prepared for various two-front contingencies, ranging from peacetime political-military coordination, direct material support to keep India “off-balance,” and opportunistic aggression by one country when India was dealing with the other.⁴⁹ The recent conflict served as a catalyst for a darker conclusion: China has transitioned from a quiet partner to an active antagonist in a combined front.

During the May 2025 conflict, China’s intervention was both material and digital. Pakistan did not just deploy high-end Chinese hardware including J-10C and JF-17 fighter jets, PL-15E missiles, HQ-9P air defense systems, and possibly CM-400AKG hypersonic missiles. It arguably operated as an extension of the Chinese military machine. Evidence suggests Pakistan relied on Beijing’s real-time space-based intelligence collection, radar feeds, navigation and targeting updates, and tactical data links.⁵⁰ As Indian Deputy Chief of Army Staff Lieutenant General Singh noted, the Pakistani military was effectively receiving “live inputs” from Beijing.⁵¹

Beyond hardware and battlefield advisory, China sought to directly stress Indian defenses in other domains throughout the engagements. These included:

- **Border Probing:** While Indian forces were engaged with Pakistan, China reportedly utilized drones to probe sensitive sectors of the India-China border, forcing New Delhi to divert attention and resources.
- **Maritime Surveillance:** Over 200 vessels from China’s distant water fishing fleet – known to conduct surveillance and reconnaissance – concentrated just outside India’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) coinciding with Indian naval exercises in the midst of the crisis with Pakistan and days before the outbreak of the conflict.⁵² The entry of a Chinese spy ship into the Indian Ocean raised alarms that Beijing was feeding tactical intelligence directly to the Pakistani Navy.⁵³

⁴⁸ Ashok K. Kantha, “The New Battle Challenge of China-Pakistan Collusion,” *The Hindu*, July 6, 2025,

<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-new-battle-challenge-of-china-pakistan-collusion/article69780786.ece>.

⁴⁹ Sushant Singh, “The Challenge of a Two-Front War: India’s China-Pakistan Dilemma,” Stimson Center, April 19, 2021,

<https://www.stimson.org/2021/the-challenge-of-a-two-front-war-indias-china-pakistan-dilemma/>.

⁵⁰ Sudhi Ranjan Sen and Dan Strumpf, “China Gave Pakistan Satellite Help, India Defense Group Says,” *Bloomberg*, May 18, 2025,

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-05-18/china-gave-pakistan-satellite-support-indian-defense-group-says>.

⁵¹ Sakshi Dayal, “China Helped Pakistan with ‘live Inputs’ in Conflict with India, Indian Army Deputy Chief Says,” *Reuters*, July 4, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-helped-pakistan-with-live-inputs-conflict-with-india-indian-army-deputy-2025-07-04/>.

⁵² Damien Symon (@detresfa_), “Operating just 120 nautical miles from recent Indian naval drills, a threat often overlooked is China’s distant-water fleet,” X, May 3, 2025, https://x.com/detresfa_/status/1918857715931344957; Kantha, “The New Battle Challenge of China-Pakistan Collusion.”

⁵³ “Amid India-Pakistan Tensions, China’s ‘spy Ship’ Approaches India’s Neighbourhood,” *Firstpost*, May 14, 2025, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/amid-india-pakistan-tensions-chinas-spy-ship-approaches-india-neighbourhood-13888538.html>.

- **The Digital Front:** While a coalition of Pakistani hacktivists targeted Indian networks, the most sophisticated cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure—including coordinated large-scale DDoS attacks—were traced back to Chinese soil.⁵⁴ China also engaged in propaganda and disinformation campaigns in support of Pakistan.⁵⁵

This combined threat could fundamentally alter the regional balance of power. With Chinese technical support, Pakistan may now achieve operational parity with India in critical niches, or in limited windows. In a short, swift conflict where long-term attrition is secondary to immediate impact, China's support as an over-the-horizon combatant effectively neutralizes India's conventional force advantages. If China were to take the next step of simultaneous action on its border with India or leverage its naval presence in the Indian ocean to menace India's maritime approaches, this dual front would overwhelm Indian defenses.

China appears to be doubling down on this approach. Since the conflict, Beijing has offered—and Pakistan seems likely to acquire—5th-Generation J-35 stealth fighters, KJ-500 AEW&C aircraft, and HQ-19 ballistic missile defense systems.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Pakistan is poised to induct eight Hangor class submarines into its Navy between 2026-28 that will undoubtedly complicate Indian naval operations.⁵⁷ To support this, PLA Navy staff will likely be deployed to naval bases like Gwadar to train submariners, maintain the port and vessels, perform repairs, and provide logistical support.⁵⁸

China's motives are multi-fold as these efforts seek to at least maintain a balance of power and potentially "contain India" or "bog India down" on the subcontinent.⁵⁹ They provide a laboratory for "live-fire demonstrations" of Chinese weapons to collect performance data, validate the technology, and boost Chinese exports.⁶⁰ Former PLA officials also maintain that these demonstrations enhance Chinese assertiveness and deter middle powers from taking actions that challenge or provoke China.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Rajesh Pant, Shailender Arya, and Nikhil Iyer, "India's Cyber Resilience After Operation Sindoor," The Asia Group, October 2025, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/the-asia-group-llc_indias-cyber-resilience-after-operation-activity-7379742026524794880-a8yH/

⁵⁵ Kantha, "The New Battle Challenge of China-Pakistan Collusion."

⁵⁶ Mike Yeo, "Pakistan Says China Offered 40 J-35 Stealth Aircraft, among Others," *Breaking Defense*, June 10, 2025, <https://breakingdefense.com/2025/06/pakistan-says-china-offered-40-j-35-stealth-aircraft-among-others/>.

⁵⁷ Seong Hyeon Choi, "Pakistan's Navy Is Set to Have Chinese Subs in 2026. What Does It Mean for India?," South China Morning Post, November 8, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3332051/pakistans-navy-set-have-chinese-subs-2026-what-does-it-mean-india>.

⁵⁸ You Ji, "The Indian Ocean: A Grand Sino-Indian Game of 'Go'," in *India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean*, ed. David Brewster, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018: 106–7.

⁵⁹ Yun Sun, "China's Strategic Assessment of the Ladakh Clash," *War on the Rocks*, June 19, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-the-ladakh-clash/>.; Seema Sirohi, "China Is Mis-Playing the Relationship with India: Rush Doshi," *The Economic Times*, August 12, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/china-is-mis-playing-the-relationship-with-india-rush-doshi/articleshow/112432253.cms>.

⁶⁰ Kantha, "The New Battle Challenge of China-Pakistan Collusion."

⁶¹ Zhou Bo, "4 Lessons for China as Pakistan J-10s down Indian Rafale Jets," *South China Morning Post*, May 16, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/opinion/china-opinion/article/3310220/4-lessons-china-pakistan-j-10s-down-indian-rafale-jets>.

In previous research on the China-Pakistan threshold alliance, I have assessed that both countries are engaged in a growing number of military exercises exhibiting an increasing degree of complexity that bolster both their capabilities and interoperability. While it may not present an immediate threat, the intellectual foundations for Chinese basing in Pakistan are well developed. The prospects for China projecting military power over the Indian Ocean from Pakistan's Western coast are therefore increasingly likely and face fewer obstacles than previously thought. The political environment is welcoming, the material challenges are solvable, and the geopolitical obstacles restricting China from picking sides and antagonizing India have completely disappeared.⁶²

To counter this fused two-front reality that India faces, New Delhi is now exploring various "offset" strategies, which requires making difficult sovereign choices. Some remedies debated by India's strategic community include: significant increases in defense spending; deeper integration with global partners and allies; a complete overhaul of military doctrine to prioritize specific fronts; rapid adoption of AI and autonomous systems; and a re-evaluation of the role of nuclear deterrence in conventional escalations.

5. China's Inroads into the Indian Ocean

China's substantial inroads into the Indian Ocean—with growing People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) surface combatant capability and increasing naval presence—are eroding India's prior advantages and threaten Indian interests. While India's naval capabilities have faltered, there are early signs of a turnaround.

China's Growing Naval Capabilities

China's growing naval capabilities and naval presence in the Indian Ocean region are well documented and part of a longer-term strategy to secure its maritime interests. Since the first continuous naval deployments in 2008, China's presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has grown steadily. Although secondary to China's focus on the Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean is essential for securing China's sea lines of communication – especially for energy imports and for sustaining Belt and Road investments in Africa and South Asia, and the Middle East. Beijing has combined anti-piracy deployments, security cooperation with regional partners, infrastructure investments, and overseas military facilities to lay a foundation for power-projection in the Indian Ocean.

China's capacity for naval presence has grown considerably over the past two decades. It is conceivable that around 2030, China would possess enough warships to create an Indian Ocean fleet if it so chose. In 2020, the Office of Naval Intelligence estimated China would build 67 new

⁶² Sameer P. Lalwani, "Threshold Alliance: The China-Pakistan Military Relationship," US Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 517, March 2023, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/sr-517_threshold-alliance-china-pakistan-military-relationship.pdf.

major surface combatants and 12 new nuclear powered submarines by 2030.⁶³ China military scholars have assessed that much of this surface combatant fleet with their superfluous survivability and long ranges would be less useful for counter-intervention, and optimized for power projection and sea control, especially against middle powers like India.⁶⁴ Former Chinese officials have openly discussed this surplus for the Indian Ocean.⁶⁵

China certainly faces sustainment challenges to a large naval presence so far from home ports, but it is on a path to resolving these issues with replenishment ships, commercial shipping vessels and supply points, and Belt and Road initiative projects repurposed for logistics and basing. There is similar reason to expect China will become more proficient at carrier air support by 2030, but if not, it could still rely on its formidable anti-air warfare capabilities, air support out of bases like Djibouti or the South China Sea (or future bases in Pakistan or Myanmar), and its long-range missiles.⁶⁶

Naval Ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region

Growing ambitions for an Indian Ocean fleet accompany China's rapidly expanding navy.⁶⁷ China pursues this interest through conspicuous attempts to acquire military facilities from Djibouti to the UAE, through intelligence collection efforts in the region and, more generally, through a significant uptick in port visits and diplomatic presence over the past decade.⁶⁸ The PLAN itself seeks to project power to fulfill its responsibility for protecting its Middle East oil supplies, its expat community, and its overseas investments.⁶⁹

This ambition is reflected within China's strategic community, in which there is increasing discussion and advocacy for an Indian Ocean fleet to protect and project China's interests.⁷⁰ Several scholars contend that China has the "political, logistical, and security foundations for such ambition" and "does intend to develop some sort of Indian Ocean force."⁷¹

⁶³ Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2024*, Annual Report to Congress, released on December 18, 2024; Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33153>.

⁶⁴ M. Taylor Fravel and Christopher P. Twomey, "Projecting Strategy: The Myth of Chinese Counter-intervention," *The Washington Quarterly*, October 2015, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/twq/v37i4/f_0033658_27435.pdf.

⁶⁵ Zhou Bo, "In 13 years of escort in the Gulf of Aden, the Chinese Navy Has Done More Than Just Combat Piracy." (Translated), *Guancha*, December 26, 2021, https://www.guancha.cn/ZhouBo3/2021_12_26_619871_s.shtml.

⁶⁶ Rick Joe, "A Tale of 2 Navies: India and China's Current Carrier and Escort Procurement," *The Diplomat*, August 4, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/a-tale-of-2-navies-india-and-chinas-current-carrier-and-escort-procurement/>.

⁶⁷ Christopher K. Colley, "A Future Chinese Indian Ocean Fleet?," *War on the Rocks*, April 2, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/a-future-chinese-indian-ocean-fleet/>.

⁶⁸ Gordon Lubold and Warren P. Strobel, "Secret Chinese Port Project in Persian Gulf Rattles U.S. Relations With U.A.E.," *Wall Street Journal*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/us-china-uae-military-11637274224>;

Joshua T. White, "China's Indian Ocean Ambitions," Brookings Institution, June 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-indian-ocean-ambitions/>;

Colley, "A Future Chinese Indian Ocean Fleet?"; Jeffrey Becker, "China Maritime Report No. 11: Securing China's Lifelines across the Indian Ocean," CMSI China Maritime Reports, December 1, 2020, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/11>.

⁷⁰ Bo, "In 13 years of escort in the Gulf of Aden,"; Hu Bo, "Prospects for China's Maritime Strategy in the Indian Ocean," *Asia Policy* 16, no. 3, 2021: 18–22; David Brewster, *India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

⁷¹ Colley, "A Future Chinese Indian Ocean Fleet?"

Even if China has not fully determined its Indian Ocean plans, the established groundwork could permit it to scale into a decisive force when it chooses. If an opportunity emerges such as a natural disaster, non-state actor threat, security vacuum, or political crisis, Beijing may build on this foundation to quickly increase the size and scope of its ship presence, sustainment assets, and personnel in the region.⁷² The intentions of a rising power with rapidly expanding military capabilities can change quickly, as they appeared to do when China shifted from a collaborative posture with India at a fall 2019 leaders' summit to surging 50,000 troops on the disputed border a few months later.

China's expanding naval presence in the Indian Ocean already threatens India's homeland, commercial activity, and naval freedom of action. Certainly this threat was driven home when, during the 2017 India-China Doklam crisis, the PLAN conducted live-fire combat drills in the Western Indian Ocean.⁷³ A PLAN Indian Ocean fleet could militarily and economically intimidate states, just as it has done in the South China Sea for years. This could include engaging in unsafe conduct close to ships and planes, harassing commercial or naval vessels, and entering other countries' waters and airspace.⁷⁴ Recent iterations of the Pentagon's China Military Power Report observes that China's navy is developing the capabilities and concepts to conduct "offensive operations" deep in the Indian Ocean, presumably including blockades, air assaults, missile bombardments, or even amphibious assaults against targets on land and at sea.⁷⁵

These threat perceptions of Chinese maritime dominance helped propel India closer to Western coalition deterrence missions by joining as the Combined Maritime Force and the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness.

Routinizing Presence in the IOR

The prospect of a permanent naval fleet in the Indian Ocean seems increasingly plausible given its actual growing naval presence and posture in recent years. As part of its expanding footprint and political influence, China's operational naval presence in the Indian Ocean has become more routine including dual use distant water fishing fleets, surveillance vessels, PLA navy surface combatants and submarines. Indian officials claim to observe three to six PLAN warships in the Indian Ocean at any given time along with two to four surveillance vessels.⁷⁶ This seems to be validated by the open-source data I collected on Chinese survey vessels operating in the Indian Ocean in 2025.

⁷² Bo, "Prospects for China's Maritime Strategy in the Indian Ocean"

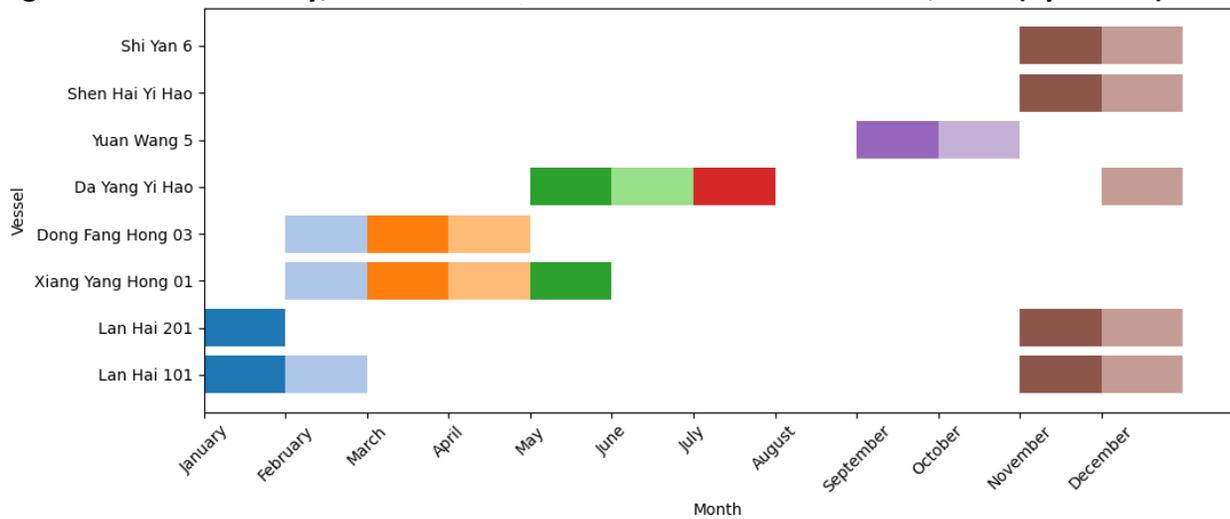
⁷³ "Amid Doklam Standoff with India, China's Navy Holds Rare Live-Fire Drill in Indian Ocean," *Indian Express*, August 25, 2017, <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/china-navy-indian-ocean-fire-drill-doklam-sikkim-4813552/>.

⁷⁴ Sameer Lalwani, "The Chinese Threat No One Is Talking About — And How to Counter It," *Politico*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/03/16/india-china-indian-ocean-00017520>.

⁷⁵ Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021*, Annual Report to Congress, Department of Defense, 2021, p. 77.

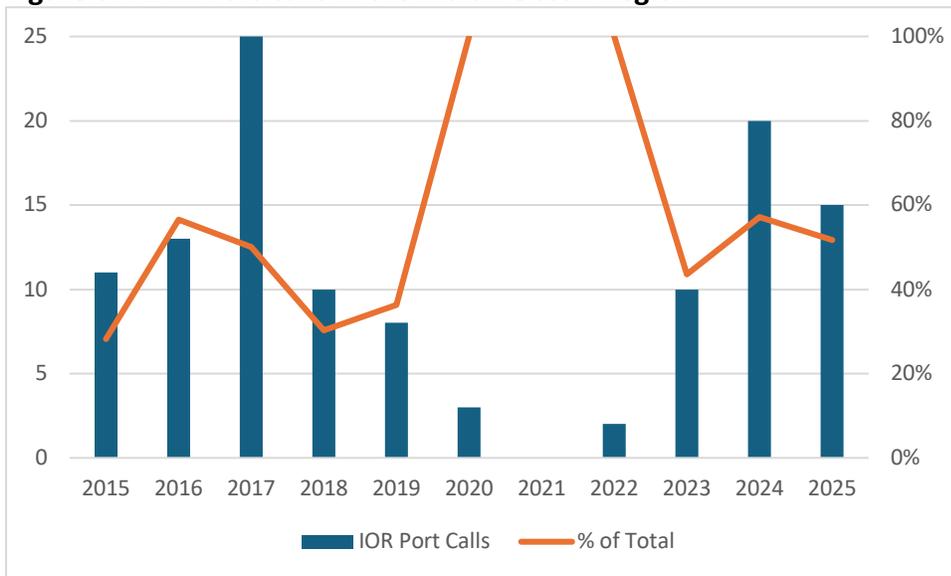
⁷⁶ "India Keeping 'Very Close Watch' on Chinese Vessels in Indian Ocean Region, Says Navy Chief," *The Indian Express*, April 30, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-keeping-very-close-watch-on-chinese-vessels-in-indian-ocean-region-says-navy-chief-8583315/>.

Figure 2: Chinese Survey/Research Vessels Present in the Indian Ocean, 2025 (by Month)⁷⁷



Chinese surface combatants, submarines, and auxiliary vessels now conduct more frequent port visits to Indian Ocean littoral states, reinforcing diplomatic ties and normalizing the PLAN's operational access to key regional hubs. After a lull during the Covid pandemic, the PLAN's rate of port calls in the Indian Ocean has once again spiked, both in terms of total visits, but also as a share of total port calls.

Figure 3: PLAN Port Calls in the Indian Ocean Region⁷⁸



China has conducted an increasing number of exercises in the Indian Ocean over the past six years. Between 2020 and 2022, China conducted between four to five maritime military

⁷⁷ Data for this figure was compiled from open sources by the author.

⁷⁸ Data compiled by author and coded from dataset accompanying Phillip C. Saunders and Melodie Ha, "China's Military Diplomacy," *China Strategic Perspectives*, No. 19, Institute for National Strategic Studies, NDU Press: Washington, DC, 2025, <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/china-strategic-perspectives/19>.

exercises in the region, but that shot up dramatically in the past three years. These exercises give China the opportunity to operate in and near the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, the Gulf of Oman, the Malacca Strait, the Mozambique Channel and the Red Sea, among others.⁷⁹

Figure 4: PLA Maritime Exercises in the Indian Ocean Region⁸⁰



China’s major naval exercise with Pakistan provides a useful illustration. In November 2023’s Sea Guardian-3 exercise, the PLAN and the Pakistan Navy conducted their largest-ever bilateral maritime combat drills in the northern Arabian Sea and off Karachi, Pakistan, aimed at enhancing joint responses to maritime security threats and boosting interoperability. The PLAN deployed a task group of six naval units including a Type 052D guided-missile destroyer, Type 054A guided-missile frigates, a Type 903 replenishment/supply ship, and a conventional submarine and submarine support ship. Pakistan contributed multiple surface combatants including the Type 054A/P frigate and F-22P frigates, plus several air assets. The exercise featured a comprehensive set of complex drills designed to simulate multi-domain operational scenarios and build higher levels of cooperation. This included formation maneuvering, visit-board-search-and-seize, helicopter cross-deck landings, joint search and rescue, anti-submarine warfare, and air-defense. Notably, the exercise included the first joint maritime patrol conducted by both navies in the Arabian Sea, underlining enhanced tactical integration.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Darshana M. Baruah, “China in the Indian Ocean: A Stronger Indo-Pacific Presence,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, May 22, 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/charting-china/2025/05/china-in-the-indian-ocean-a-stronger-indo-pacific-presence/>.

⁸⁰ Data compiled by author and coded from dataset accompanying Saunders and Ha, “China’s Military Diplomacy”.

⁸¹ Liu Xuanzun, “China, Pakistan Hold Largest-Ever Joint Naval Drills,” *Global Times*, November 12, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202311/1301682.shtml>; Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, “China-Pakistan Sea Guardian 2023 Joint Maritime Exercise Concludes,” November 19, 2023, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16267834.html.

India's Naval Slump

Many American and Indian observers were, for a time, too sanguine about the balance of power in the Indian Ocean. In 2018, India's naval chief asserted the regional balance of power "favor[ed]" India over China.⁸² During the 2020 Sino-Indian border crisis, Admiral Arun Prakash, the former Chairman of India's Chiefs of Staff, lamented the border vulnerabilities, but claimed, "at sea, we have an advantage over the Chinese".⁸³ Five years ago, American naval officers also assessed India reigns "supreme" in the Indian Ocean because of its home field advantages.⁸⁴

A decade ago, India's naval power was gravely slumping. The reasons are well-known: anemic budgets, dysfunctional procurement processes, and over-prioritization of the Army and continental borders. More generally, the Indian naval budget is not where it should be. In 2015 India's National Security Advisory Board, as well as one of India's former foreign secretaries, recommend that the navy's budget rise to at least 30% of the total share to counter China's rise by 2030.⁸⁵ Unfortunately, the Indian naval budget has generally hovered between 14-17%, and 20% at its peak.⁸⁶

In 2013, Indian officials ambitiously targeted a 200-ship navy for 2023, but today, the Indian Navy has approximately 150 warships.⁸⁷ It seems likely that in the 2020-2030 decade, China will build as many new major combatant ships - around 80 - as the Indian Navy's total major combatants. This partly stems from India's increased attention towards its continental border with China over the past decade. After the outbreak of the 2020 crisis, the naval modernization budget slumped while the Army's modernization budget grew.⁸⁸

Washington has officially banked on the Indian navy taking a "leading role in maintaining Indian Ocean security"⁸⁹ and may seek "supporting contributions"⁹⁰ against Chinese threats, but India may not always be able to provide this. While Indian strategists believed its navy offers a key

⁸² Rahul Singh, "'Second Indigenous Aircraft Carrier Got Necessary Impetus,' Says Navy Chief Admiral Sunil Lanba," *Hindustan Times*, December 3, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/second-indigenous-aircraft-carrier-got-necessary-impetus-says-navy-chief-admiral-sunil-lanba/story-DV0HoMadxIxdg65EsNoHAL.html>.

⁸³ Yaroslav Trofimov, "India Seeks Naval Edge as China Penetrates Indian Ocean," *Wall Street Journal*, September 24, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/world/india/india-seeks-naval-edge-as-china-penetrates-indian-ocean-11600945203>.

⁸⁴ Michael A. McDevitt, *China as a Twenty-First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2020.

⁸⁵ Shyam Saran, "PLA Increasing Border Threat Is China's Way of Distracting India from Building Good Navy," *The Print*, March 23, 2022, <https://theprint.in/opinion/pla-increasing-border-threat-is-chinas-way-of-distracting-india-from-building-good-navy/884588/>.

⁸⁶ Laxman Kumar Behera, "India's Defence Budget 2023-24," February 7, 2023, Vivekananda International Foundation, <https://www.vifindia.org/2023/february/07/indias-defence-budget-2023-24>.

⁸⁷ "Indian Navy to Have 200 Warships in next 10 Years," *The Times of India*, November 13, 2013, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Indian-Navy-to-have-200-warships-in-next-10-years/articleshow/25708914.cms?referral=PM>;

James E. Fanell, "Delhi's ambitious plan for naval power and strategic deterrence" GIS Reports, December 2, 2025, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/growth-indian-naval-power/>.

⁸⁸ Arzan Tarapore, "Engaging with Reality in the Indian Ocean," United States Studies Centre, September 12, 2025, <https://www.uscc.edu.au/engaging-with-reality-in-the-indian-ocean>.

⁸⁹ U. S. Naval Institute Staff, "U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific," *USNI News*, January 15, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/01/15/u-s-strategic-framework-for-the-indo-pacific>.

⁹⁰ Ashley J. Tellis, "Waylaid by Contradictions: Evaluating Trump's Indo-Pacific Strategy," *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2020): 123–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1849992>.

advantage over China where it could go on the offensive in a conflict, given the aforementioned trendlines, there is reasonable doubt as to India's ability to defend its own backyard in the future.⁹¹

Diversioin

Due in part to China's aggressive actions along the disputed border in 2020 and beyond demanding India's focus and resources, New Delhi has struggled to prioritize its navy and the maritime domain. Amid the 2020 India-China border crisis, I speculated that part of China's motive was a competitive strategy to create and exploit asymmetric advantages, forcing India to over-exert itself on its land borders to the detriment of its maritime capabilities.⁹²

Former Indian officials have recently expressed growing concern around China's diversionary strategy. Former foreign secretary Shyam Saran expressed concerns that "China is attempting to tie us down on land so that it can prevent, or at least slow down India's expansion in [the maritime] domain that favours the latter."⁹³ Similarly, Lieutenant General Prakash Menon, the former military advisor to the National Security Council Secretariat, argued, "China's aggressive moves on the northern borders... is not about settling the disputed border by force. It is part of a larger strategy directed at containing India within the sub-continent and reducing its ability to play an effective role in China's ongoing confrontation with the US and its allies. Weakening India's military power is the aim."⁹⁴

Signs of Optimism

There are some signs of a turnaround. India's naval chief recently announced that India is adding a new ship to its navy every 40 days and aims to have 200 warships by 2035.⁹⁵ India's investments in its defense industrial base may be starting to mature and pay off. A wider range of Indian firms, including in the private sector, are now in the business of designing the propulsion systems, sensors, missile platforms, and the software and combat management

⁹¹ Raja Menon, "How INS Visakhapatnam Gives Indian Navy an Advantage over China in Indian Ocean," *Firstpost*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/how-ins-visakhapatnam-gives-indian-navy-an-advantage-over-china-in-indian-ocean-10160611.html>; Lalwani, "The Chinese Threat No One Is Talking About — And How to Counter It."

⁹² Sameer Lalwani, "Revelations and Opportunities: What the United States Can Learn from the Sino-Indian Crisis," *War on the Rocks*, July 10, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/07/revelations-and-opportunities-what-the-united-states-can-learn-from-the-sino-indian-crisis/>.

⁹³ Shyam Saran, "PLA Increasing Border Threat Is China's Way of Distracting India from Building Good Navy," *ThePrint*, March 23, 2022, <https://theprint.in/opinion/pla-increasing-border-threat-is-chinas-way-of-distracting-india-from-building-good-navy/884588/>.

⁹⁴ Lt General Prakash Menon, "At LAC, China Is Not Settling 'disputed' Borders. It's Containing India," *The Print*, August 29, 2023, <https://theprint.in/opinion/at-lac-china-is-not-settling-disputed-borders-its-containing-india/1735155/>.

⁹⁵ "Indian Navy Adding One New Indigenous Warship or Submarine Every 40 Days: Admiral Dinesh K Tripathi," *The Economic Times*, November 4, 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/indian-navy-adding-one-new-indigenous-warship-or-submarine-every-40-days-admiral-dinesh-k-tripathi/articleshow/125086363.cms?from=mdr>.

systems for the Indian Navy.⁹⁶ Additionally, India's shipyards seem poised for significant investment and growth.⁹⁷

Moreover, India seems committed to steadily building the capacity for its own robust maritime anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities by investing heavily in advanced sensing, surveillance, and strike systems that extend the nation's reach and responsiveness across the Indian Ocean.⁹⁸ At the foundation of this strategy lies modern aerial maritime patrol platforms such as India's suite of American platforms including P-8I long-range maritime patrol aircraft, MH-60R Seahawk helicopters for anti-submarine warfare, and soon to be inducted MQ-9B Sea Guardian drones for persistent maritime domain awareness. Together these deliver real-time targeting data and tracking continuity over long distances.

This will soon be complemented by significant upgrades in space-based ISR, which can enhance maritime domain awareness by providing persistent, wide-area monitoring of surface and littoral movements.⁹⁹ Enhanced coastal radar networks, integrated with airborne and space sensors, improve early warning and tracking, enabling Indian forces to detect and characterize potential threats far from the homeland.

Alongside these sensing improvements, India is strengthening its undersea warfare posture and strike capabilities. India is finally moving forward on the expansion of its conventional submarine fleet to provide stealthy deterrence and area denial options in key sea lanes.¹⁰⁰ On the surface, India is fielding longer-range anti-ship cruise missiles such as the BrahMos missile, capable of striking hostile vessels at extended ranges with high speed and precision. Additionally, India recently tested its own hypersonic long-range anti-ship missiles.¹⁰¹

To further its reach, India is heavily investing in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to transform this archipelago that sits at the South of the Malacca into "a fortress that Beijing cannot

⁹⁶ Vikram Mittal, "The Indian Navy Is Building And Fielding A New Ship Every 40 Days," *Forbes*, November 11, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/vikrammittal/2025/11/11/the-indian-navy-is-building-and-fielding-a-new-ship-every-40-days/>.

⁹⁷ "India's Defence Shipbuilding Sector Stands at Multi-Decade Transformation Threshold: Report," *The Economic Times*, December 19, 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/transportation/shipping/-/transport/indias-defence-shipbuilding-sector-stands-at-multi-decade-transformation-threshold-report/articleshow/126074361.cms?from=mdr>.

⁹⁸ Arzan Tarapore, "Building Strategic Leverage in the Indian Ocean Region," *The Washington Quarterly*, 43:4, 2020: 207-237, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1850833>.

⁹⁹ Dr. Udaya Shankar Puranik, "India's Space-Based Surveillance Network A Strategic Leap into the Future," *ScienceIndiamag*, January 16, 2026, <https://scienceindiamag.in/indias-space-based-surveillance-network-a-strategic-leap-into-the-future/>.

¹⁰⁰ Kartik Bommakanti, "Germany and India Forge Submarine Cooperation: Lessons from History," Observer Research Foundation, February 4, 2026, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/germany-and-india-forge-submarine-cooperation-lessons-from-history>.

¹⁰¹ Adithya Krishna Menon, "India Showcases First Hypersonic Anti-Ship Missile System in National Parade," *Naval News*, January 29, 2026, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2026/01/india-showcases-first-hypersonic-anti-ship-missile-system-in-national-parade/>.

ignore”¹⁰² with investments in airfield upgrades, jetty expansion for large naval ships, logistics and energy storage, troop accommodations, and maritime surveillance networks.¹⁰³

Its coastal defense systems help augment its shore-based firepower to challenge any adversary attempting to operate within the Indian Ocean littorals. By integrating these strike assets with improved ISR and command-and-control networks, India is progressively shaping a layered, multi-domain A2/AD capability in the Indian Ocean that will complicate China’s power projection. Some scholars have advocated ways the United States could do even more to support India’s denial strategy by supporting their acquisition of more ISR and strike assets.¹⁰⁴

6. India’s Stakes in Taiwan and Response to a Cross-Strait Conflict

New Delhi is raising its stakes in Taiwan’s security, and in the event of a cross-Strait conflict, India has the potential to make meaningful military contributions to help deter a conflict around the first island chain and support a coalitional defense of Taiwan.

India’s Stakes

Though a fuller analysis of India-Taiwan relations is beyond the scope of this testimony, it is safe to say that India has developed increasing stakes in cross-Strait stability. India’s strategic discourse on Taiwan has noticeably evolved over recent years with a former Foreign Secretary warning of India’s equities in a Taiwan crisis, the Indian Chief of Defence Staff ordering a study on India’s military options, and Indian Service Chiefs attending a Taipei security conference along with two other military officials.¹⁰⁵ The Indian military is reportedly studying one potential response where India gets “directly involved along their northern border, opening a new theater of war for China.”¹⁰⁶

There is growing clarity on how an invasion and capture of Taiwan would harm Indian economic interests, augment the threat to India posed by China, and damage India’s partnership with the United States and other friendly nations in the region. If a war over Taiwan could cost up to 10%

¹⁰² Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, “Underestimating China Why America Needs a New Strategy of Allied Scale to Offset Beijing’s Enduring Advantages,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2025: 77.

¹⁰³ Rimjhim Singh, “India upgrading strategic military infra in Andaman & Nicobar Islands,” *Business Standard*, April 10, 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/india-news/india-upgrading-strategic-military-infra-in-andaman-nicobar-islands-124041000300_1.html.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Peters, “The United States and India: A Call to Confront the Shared China Threat,” Heritage Foundation, September 25, 2025, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/the-united-states-and-india-call-confront-the-shared-china-threat>.

¹⁰⁵ Vijay Gokhale, “What Should India Do Before the Next Taiwan Strait Crisis?” Carnegie India, April 17, 2023, <https://carnegieindia.org/2023/04/17/what-should-india-do-before-next-taiwan-strait-crisis-pub-89515>; Nitin Gokhale, Indian Military Weighs Options In Case China Attacks Taiwan, *StratNews Global*, August 7, 2023, <https://stratnewsglobal.com/india/indian-military-weighs-options-in-case-china-attacks-taiwan/>; Aadil Brar, “India’s three former service chiefs held a closed-door meet in Taiwan,” *The Print*, August 14, 2023, <https://theprint.in/opinion/chinascope/indias-three-former-service-chiefs-held-a-closed-door-meet-in-taiwan-heres-the-inside-story/1713343/>.

¹⁰⁶ Sudhi Ranjan Sen, “India’s Military Studying Options for Any China-Taiwan War,” *Bloomberg*, September 8, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-08/india-s-military-studying-options-for-any-china-war-on-taiwan>;

of global GDP and devastate every Asian economy,¹⁰⁷ the potential disruption to global digital flows through submarine cables would have a catastrophic impact on India's exposed services industries including e-commerce, IT-enabled services, logistics, and entertainment, which compose a significant portion of the Indian economy.¹⁰⁸ An annexation of Taiwan would also cost India an important economic partner that has benefitted India's economy with rising trade, investment, jobs, skilling, and advanced technology transfers, including semiconductors.

Furthermore, India maintains strategic interests in deterring Chinese aggression and preserving the status quo in the First Island Chain. The uncertain state of the cross-Strait challenge consumes an overwhelming share of PRC military planning and resources. If China were to successfully annex Taiwan, the PLA would be free to redirect its attention westward and pressure India even more across its 2,100-mile contested border and in the Indian Ocean.¹⁰⁹ A China dominant over a unipolar Asia would also become a meddlesome regional hegemon prone to economic coercion and intolerant of military rivals, affording India no room for its own economic growth and rising power.¹¹⁰

Cross-Strait Contingency

How then might this translate into Indian reactions in the event of a contingency over Taiwan and the First Island Chain? Here, I can only speculate possibilities.

Over time, U.S.–India defense cooperation could evolve to motivate and enable India to make meaningful contributions in a potential Indo-Pacific contingency involving China. U.S. strategists often envision India's military contribution applying horizontal pressure along the disputed Western border,¹¹¹ forcing China to divert resources or overwhelming its ability to conduct multi-theater operations.¹¹²

Alternatively, India could cover down in the Indian Ocean and assume greater day-to-day maritime security responsibilities typically handled by the U.S. Navy. By relieving the U.S. of these responsibilities—maritime security, counter-piracy, and deterring opportunistic aggression¹¹³—India would free American assets to reorient to the Pacific. Covering down could

¹⁰⁷ David Stringer, "War Over Taiwan Would Cost World Economy \$10 Trillion," *Bloomberg*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2024-01-09/war-over-taiwan-would-cost-world-economy-10-trillion-big-take>.

¹⁰⁸ Gokhale, "What Should India Do Before the Next Taiwan Strait Crisis?" 2023

¹⁰⁹ Harsh Pant and Yogesh Joshi, "India Must Prepare for a Conflict Over Taiwan," *Hindustan Times*, August 3, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/india-must-prepare-for-a-conflict-over-taiwan-101691072216919.html>.

¹¹⁰ Jennifer Lind, "Life in China's Asia What Regional Hegemony Would Look Like," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/life-chinas-asia>.

¹¹¹ Russell A. Berman and Michael Auslin, "Opening Up Second Fronts in Great Power Conflict," *The National Interest*, February 24, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/opening-second-fronts-great-power-conflict-200773>; Ken Moriyasu, "India Presents China a Two-Front Problem, U.S. Navy Chief Suggests," *Nikkei Asia*, August 27, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/politics/international-relations/indo-pacific/india-presents-china-a-two-front-problem-u.s.-navy-chief-suggests>.

¹¹² Joel Wuthnow, *System Overload: Can China's Military Be Distracted in a War over Taiwan?* Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, June 2020, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/2232448/system-overload-can-chinas-military-be-distracted-in-a-war-over-taiwan/>.

¹¹³ Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, "Opportunistic Aggression in the Twenty-first Century," *Survival* 62, no. 2 (April–May 2020): 157–182, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00396338.2020.1792129>.

even involve the Indian Navy protecting transiting U.S. naval assets, by detecting, stalking, and holding at risk PLAN submarines that might seek to threaten U.S. capacity to swing forces across the Indian Ocean to the Pacific.¹¹⁴ India's surface fleet and air forces are also capable of air defense missions that could shield U.S. naval vessels maneuvering through the Indian Ocean from PRC aerial assaults.

Without directly mobilizing any of its own military assets, India could still contribute significantly to a coalition defense that leverages its geography by offering the United States and its partners military logistics support, ground and space-based ISR, overflight for intelligence collection to bomber taskforces, and access during peacetime and wartime to critical geographies like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. India could also provide surge capacity for defense industrial and subcomponent production in the event of a protracted conflict.

While India may not undertake all or any of these actions, Indian analysts and former officials are actively debating these possibilities due to India's own strategic stakes. I would argue that as U.S.-India defense cooperation deepens, the prospect of Indian involvement grows, and that itself strengthens deterrence against future PLA aggression.

7. Recommendations for Congress

I would propose several measures that Congress can lead to help bolster Indian deterrence capacities versus China and enhance the US-India defense partnership.

- **Support Indian Defense Capabilities** through greater funding for:
 - Military exercises and civil-military TTXs through INDOPACOM. We should aim to exercise in places that make China uncomfortable like Sikkim and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands;
 - The International Military Education and Training (IMET) program to support training of Indian military personnel with U.S. personnel for operational missions, such as training on theater anti-submarine warfare;
 - Foreign Military Financing and Excess Defense Articles programs that prioritize India.
- **Bolster Collaboration of US-Indian Defense Innovation Ecosystems** by expanding joint development and production of defense capabilities. This could include:
 - Enhanced funding to the Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) dedicated to supporting INDUS-X efforts, including joint accelerators, joint challenge prizes, INDUS-X Summits, and defense innovation trade delegations.

¹¹⁴ Randall G. Schriver, "Statement for the Record, Hearing on America's Way Forward in the Indo-Pacific," U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia and Nonproliferation, March 19, 2021, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA05/20210319/111383/HHRG-117-FA05-Wstate-SchriverR-20210319.pdf>.

- Resourcing a dedicated U.S.–India Prototyping Accelerator to move joint prize challenges from concept to prototype to field testing within US-India exercises, and ultimately deployment.
 - Other transaction authority pathways for DIU-led bilateral co-production projects in priority areas identified by the recent *Framework for the U.S.-India Major Defense Partnership* including ISR; undersea domain awareness; air combat and support; air and space domain awareness; munitions; and mobility.
 - Funding for foreign comparative testing, joint project agreements, and cooperation research and development agreements, especially with the Indian private sector.
 - Involvement of Indian commercial space companies in Golden Dome (SHIELD)
- **Establish a Deep-Tech Joint Investment Fund.** Congress could establish a Joint Investment Fund (first conceived in the inaugural INDUS-X joint statement of June 2023) to invest directly in the teaming of US and Indian deep-tech and defense tech firms. This could be modeled on previous joint investment fund efforts like the BIRD Foundation.
- **Streamline Export Controls** for India in certain classes of arms and commercial/dual-use capabilities in the prioritized domains specified in the US-India defense partnership framework.
 - Greater Indian military access to commercial sensing technologies—from space payloads, to UAVs, to sonobuoys—will go a long way in deterring PLA aggression.
 - Legislation to reduce certain export controls, broaden licensing, and streamline approval processes can be modeled on AUKUS and ARMOR legislation, and can amend the Arms Export Control Act to implement TRUST, INDUS-X, and/or ASIA objectives.
 - Disseminate these changes to industry through Commerce-led trade delegations and business fora so that industry is better aware of the new opportunities.
- **Direct an Independent Assessment.** As part of the next National Defense Authorization Act, the U.S. Congress could mandate an independent study to review the US-India “Major Defense Partnership” since it was announced 10 years ago in the 2016 NDAA. It could assess progress and suggest paths forward on defense operational cooperation and implementation of the *Framework* and vision of the new US National Defense Strategy. The effort can culminate in a final report to the Armed Services and Foreign Affairs Committees in both houses of Congress.