

The Himalayan Impasse: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Wake of Doklam

In mid-June 2017, Bhutanese authorities detected Chinese personnel, presumably members of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), building a road in a disputed region of the Doklam plateau near the Bhutan-China-India tri-junction. Lacking the military wherewithal to prevent the activity underway, Bhutan turned to India for assistance.¹ Within days, Indian Army units were deployed to the area to halt the road construction. Over the next month or so, Indian and Chinese military units became involved in a close confrontation with neither side displaying any interest in standing down. Eventually, the Chinese stopped their activity toward the end of August but did not abandon their claims to the disputed areas.

What prompted China's assertive actions? Why did India respond with such alacrity to address Bhutan's security concerns? Was this incident simply idiosyncratic? Or was it emblematic of deeper currents in the Sino-Indian rivalry and part of a concerted strategy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to conduct a series of limited probes along disputed borders? The answers to these questions are significant, as they could offer important clues about the current state of the Sino-Indian rivalry and its future trajectory.

How is the Sino-Indian dyad best characterized today? The term "rivalry" seems apt, given the current antagonism in the bilateral ties. Political Scientist William R. Thompson's definition of a rivalry appears to aptly describe relations between

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Beijing and New Delhi: “long-term hostility” with competition manifest in “multiple disputes, continuing disagreements and the threat of the use of force.”² An enduring rivalry, nevertheless, does not preclude significant elements of cooperation between the two states. Indeed, China and India do, on occasion, engage in cooperative endeavors for mutual benefit.

A Tangled History

There is little question that the Sino-Indian rivalry has been intensifying for the past 20 years after smoldering for half a century.³ A number of factors explain its recent escalation, but briefly recounting the rivalry’s origins would be useful first because recent events have exacerbated the rivalry. A considerable part of the rivalry can be traced to the competing worldviews of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (1947-64), and the People’s Republic of China’s revolutionary leader, Mao Zedong (1949-76). Both individuals entertained visions of their respective countries assuming leadership positions in Asia and beyond, in the twilight of the colonial era in the continent.⁴ They quickly came into conflict as they sought to formalize their inherited frontier in the Himalayas.⁵ The conflict culminated in a brief but brutal border war in October 1962.⁶ After a near complete military rout, India’s policymakers embarked upon a significant program of military modernization.

The Sino-Indian rivalry has been intensifying for the past 20 years.

Indian relations with the PRC remained strained throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with the Chinese threat to open a second front during the Indo-Pakistani border war (1965), a border skirmish in 1967, and the PRC’s support for Pakistan during the 1971 war. During the 1967 crisis, the Indian Army, smarting from its defeat in 1962, adopted an unyielding stance. Furthermore, political authorities backed up their resolve and the PLA stood down. Indeed, it was not until 1976 that full diplomatic relations were restored.

A Sino-India rapprochement of sorts followed the death of Mao. As paramount leader Deng Xiaoping consolidated his power in the late 1970s, China shifted its national priorities from militant nationalism and economic autarky to a pragmatic policy agenda of reform and opening to the outside world. This reformist agenda included foreign policy efforts to improve relations with a wide range of other states including India.

Nevertheless, tensions did not disappear, reemerging in the wake of the PRC’s early 1979 invasion of Vietnam which took place during Indian then-foreign minister Atal Behari Vajpayee’s visit to Beijing. Indeed, it was not until 1981 that the

two sides finally started a series of border negotiations. Despite these discussions, the border question remained quite fraught. In 1986, the PLA had made some small forays at a place known as Sumdorong Chu near the Bhutan, India and China tri-junction. The PLA was likely responding to the Indian Special Security Bureau's (SSB) establishment of a border post in the area in 1984. The Indian military, under the leadership of General Krishnaswami Sundarji, a flamboyant and risk-prone officer, chose to launch a major military exercise, Checkerboard, to send a dissuasive message to the PRC. This exercise surprised the PLA and led to an escalation of tensions. In its wake, however, both parties chose to pursue diplomatic strategies to try and defuse the crisis.

These efforts culminated in Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's historic December 1988 visit to the PRC. Since then, the two parties have conducted at least 20 rounds of talks. However, despite agreeing on a series of confidence-building measures signed in 1993, 1996 and 2013, all of which are designed to avoid inadvertent conflict along the disputed frontier, they are no closer to a resolution of the border dispute. After Prime Minister Narendra Modi's April 2018 visit to an "informal" summit in Wuhan, months after the Doklam flare-up, the two sides simply issued a joint statement that reiterated their interest in maintaining "peace and tranquility" along their disputed borders.

Impasse across the Himalayas

What explains the existence, robustness, and longevity of the rivalry between the PRC and India? Given the respective sizes, national ambitions, and geographic proximity of the two countries, it is simply natural that, as analyst Harry Harding explained "neither country is entirely comfortable with the rise of the other."⁷ Yet, the sentiments manifest by Beijing and New Delhi betray much more than mere mutual discomfort. The intensity and extended duration of distrust and suspicion are much greater than what would naturally exist between the two Asian giants.

The two Asian powers confront each other in a "Himalayan Impasse."⁸ In contrast to the better-known "Mexican Standoff," Beijing and New Delhi confront a chronic long-term condition rather than an acute short-term crisis. Unlike gun-slingers, the two Asian rivals are not confronting a life-and-death situation requiring an immediate decision on what course of action they should take. China and India are engaged in a "deep and enduring geopolitical rivalry."⁹ While gunfighters must swiftly decide whether to escalate (i.e. shoot first) or deescalate (i.e. back away slowly without lowering one's weapon), China and India each have the luxury of being able to deliberate on their next move without great urgency. Moreover, instead of being in very close proximity with weapons pointed at each other

in a tense faceoff, China and India have considerable distance between them—a vast mountain range, to be precise.

Can Beijing and New Delhi continue to manage this Himalayan Impasse? While it is possible, there are three reasons for great pessimism. First, the security

Unlike a “Mexican Standoff,” the “Himalayan Impasse” is a long-term condition not a short-term crisis.

dilemma may be particularly acute in the Sino-Indian rivalry, especially when combined with two virulent and “conflicting nationalist narratives ... to realize [a] ... nation’s modern greatness.”¹⁰ Indeed, contemporary India and China each possess strong nostalgia for a glorious distant past and both see themselves as aggrieved underdogs bullied by stronger powers whose time has come to restore national greatness. But neither rising power is particularly receptive to understanding the other’s perspective or perceptions. Both New Delhi and

Beijing are unable to appreciate how their rival interprets their own rhetoric and actions, leaving both powers unable to grasp the existence of security dilemma spirals.

Second, dramatic innovations in weapons technology and qualitative advancements in the strategic capabilities of both India and China have rendered “the highest mountains in the world” no longer insurmountable barriers. As Paul Bracken, the noted strategist at Yale notes, “disruptive technologies” have resulted in the “death of distance.”¹¹ Both Beijing and New Delhi possess arsenals of long range ballistic missiles that can deliver conventional or nuclear payloads across thousands of miles in a matter of minutes. Consequently, there is an increased likelihood since the 1990s of tensions and crises that could escalate into military conflict.

Finally, the interactions of each rival with third states can complicate matters. From India’s perspective, the complicating third parties are Pakistan and other states in South Asia. From China’s perspective, the complicating third party is China’s main geostrategic competitor: the United States. In this context, India’s improving ties with the United States over the last 10 years is viewed increasingly askance in Beijing.¹²

The Nuclear Inflection Point

Despite the thawing in Sino-Indian relations from the late 1970s-1990s, the rivalry between Beijing and New Delhi has intensified during the past 20 years. The May 1998 Indian nuclear tests appear to be an inflection point. The stated Indian

rationale of the tests, a perceived threat from the PRC, seized the attention of China's leadership and has led Beijing to reassess India's strategic disposition. In the years since the tests, the PRC has been taking India increasingly seriously as a long-term rival for power and influence in Asia. Beijing has noted New Delhi's efforts since the 1990s to liberalize its economy, upgrade its military, and raise its regional and global diplomatic profile.

Beijing has viewed New Delhi's consolidation of its status as a *de facto* nuclear power with apprehension. As India sought to obtain global legitimacy of its nuclear weapons program, the PRC again adopted an intransigent stance. Specifically, it vehemently objected to the U.S.-India civilian nuclear agreement of 2008, designed to grant India the status of a *de facto* nuclear weapons state without acceding to the terms of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). This development was galling to Beijing for two compelling reasons: apart from granting India the status of a nuclear weapons state outside the ambit of the NPT, it also highlighted a dramatic breakthrough in Indo-U.S. relations.

Beijing saw this breakthrough in Indo-U.S. relations as inimical to its interests because India could now serve as an offshore balancer for the United States. Even though both U.S. and Indian officials publicly eschewed any such plans, there is little question that the rise and increasing assertiveness of the PRC played a significant role in promoting the U.S.-Indian strategic rapprochement. Unsurprisingly, China has sought to thwart India's efforts to further legitimize its nascent status as a nuclear weapons state. To that end, it has steadfastly opposed India's efforts to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), a multilateral organization that oversees global nuclear commerce. Beijing's objections have been mostly procedural and largely bereft of any substantive merit.

Growing Irritants

Despite Beijing's greater assertiveness, the former regime of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2004-2014) throughout its tenure had attempted to mollify the PRC. To that end, while on a state visit to Beijing in 2013, Singh explicitly sought to reassure the PRC, at a speech to the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China, of India's interest in peace and regional stability and underscored the need for economic cooperation. Despite this and other overtures, the PRC nevertheless remained dubious about India's expanding role in Asia and its growing closeness with the United States. The warmth in Indo-U.S. relations especially concerns the PRC as an Indo-U.S. strategic alignment could balance the growing reach of the PRC in Asia.¹³

In April 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance regime was elected to power, and Narendra Modi became Prime Minister.

Little in Modi's prior political background suggested he would evince a keen interest in foreign affairs. As the chief minister of the prosperous state of Gujarat, he had made only a handful of foreign trips and were primarily designed to promote trade and attract foreign investment. More to the point, during the election campaign, he had scarcely raised any issues pertaining to questions of foreign policy. Consequently, his decision to invite President Xi Jinping to India shortly after assuming office came as a surprise to many.

As the visit unfolded with considerable fanfare, much to the dismay of Prime Minister Modi and India's foreign policy establishment, units of the PLA made a series of small incursions with troops challenging Indian military patrols in the region of Ladakh in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Under the circumstances, even amidst discussions about dramatically enhancing the scope of Chinese investment in India, Modi felt compelled to let his guest know that "even a little toothache can paralyze the entire body."¹⁴

Indian Irritants

Furthermore, India believes the PRC has challenged Indian national security not just at the land border, but also with an uptick in Chinese maritime activity. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has raised its profile in the Indian Ocean

India also believes its national security has been challenged by increased Chinese maritime activity.

since 2008 and China has been engaged in security cooperation with a wide range of countries around the Indian Ocean rim. For the past decade, a Chinese naval task force has been continuously involved in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and PLAN vessels routinely make port visits in the region. Moreover, since at least 2014, Chinese submarines have been operating in the Indian Ocean. But China's most significant involvement in the region continues to be economic. Sizeable investments and trade

flows have increased Beijing's clout, which deeply influences the economies and politics of smaller countries such as Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Chinese corporations have also invested in port facilities around the region, which has been accompanied by rumors of Beijing's desire to establish military bases in the Indian Ocean.

Indian concerns have been heightened by the construction of China's first overseas base in Djibouti on the shores of the Red Sea in 2017. While Beijing has officially labeled this base a "logistics facility" and it does not pose any direct threat to India, this move does signify the breaking of a fundamental Chinese taboo: no

longer can the PRC proclaim that it has no foreign bases or military forces stationed beyond its borders. To be clear, Djibouti is likely to be the first of a string of Chinese bases around India's extended neighborhood.¹⁵ Djibouti is a relatively uncontroversial site for China's first overseas base, especially compared to other possibilities in much closer proximity to India. Indeed, rumors have long circulated that China might establish a naval base somewhere in Pakistan, with the port of Gwadar being the most commonly mentioned location. Recently, however, other locations have been mentioned including the Maldives.

A second irritant involves China's enduring quasi-alliance relationship with India's long-standing adversary, Pakistan. New Delhi is painfully aware of Beijing's central role in enabling Islamabad to acquire nuclear weapons and China's ongoing close military ties in Pakistan. In addition, New Delhi does not believe that Beijing has made any effort to encourage Islamabad to rein in its support for armed extremist groups that repeatedly target India from sanctuaries in Pakistan. In an effort to curb their depredations, India has sought to place extremist group ringleaders, most notably Hafiz Saeed of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Maulana Masood Azhar of the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), on the UN Security Council list of global terrorists. While it is unclear if China has sought to restrain Pakistani sponsorship of terrorism against India, Beijing has in recent years put pressure on Islamabad to rein in other extremist groups, lobbying hard to prevent Pakistan-based terrorist groups from supporting Uighur radicals in western China and demanding that Islamabad make greater efforts to protect tens of thousands of PRC citizens living in Pakistan.

A third irritant for India relates to the PRC's highly ambitious "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)"—officially launched by Xi Jinping in 2013. The massive infrastructure plan involves concerted efforts to build infrastructure "belts" overland, including connecting portions of southern and western China with substantial parts of South and Central Asia, and maritime "roads" linking China's eastern coast with South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa via the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. India's main objections are twofold. First, New Delhi objects on principle to the way projects are negotiated, financed, and constructed. There is no competitive bidding and a complete lack of transparency in the way these projects are designed, launched and executed. Second, India objects because the effort directly harms its national interests. To date, the largest commitment of BRI funds that China has publicly announced is a US\$46 billion investment package for projects in Pakistan. The goal is to develop a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), including building a road and rail network across Pakistan. Some of the planned roads pass through disputed portions of the state of Jammu and Kashmir and are under Pakistan's control. In May 2017, New Delhi turned down an invitation to attend a BRI summit held in Beijing and issued a trenchant critique of the initiative based upon principle and national

interest. India's Ministry of External Affairs criticized the absence of "universally recognized international norms" in the awarding of contracts and asserted that CPEC "ignores [India's] core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity."¹⁶

Chinese Irritants

Beijing also sees irritants in Sino-Indian relations. Tibet is one perennial issue of great sensitivity to China, which has been a recurring issue in bilateral ties since the 1950s. From a Chinese perspective, New Delhi refuses to stop meddling in China's internal affairs. Beijing is adamant that the Tibetan Autonomous Region is sovereign Chinese territory, and yet India continues to have designs on the region. For China, India's nefarious intent is unambiguously evidenced by New Delhi's willingness to provide sanctuary since 1959 for Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, and to permit a Tibetan government-in-exile to operate on Indian soil. While the Dalai Lama has been a persistent and eloquent critic of the PRC's policies in Tibet, he has been unwavering in advocating nonviolent resistance and has been a voice of moderation.

Nevertheless, in Beijing's eyes, the Dalai Lama is a dangerous man intent on splitting Tibet from China. PRC leaders want to believe that decades of economic reforms and enlightened policies in Tibet have resulted in greater prosperity and contentment among ethnic Tibetans, thereby making the region more stable and weakening the Dalai Lama's sway over his "people." But for most ethnic Tibetans, the reality on the ground has been quite different: discontent has simmered because of an influx of Han Chinese who have tended to benefit disproportionately from the better economic opportunities in Tibet since the 1980s. Moreover in recent years, ethnic Tibetans have been subjected to greater repression and increased surveillance by the PRC coercive apparatus—similar harsh measures of the kind now being endured by ethnic Uighurs in Xinjiang.¹⁷ Consequently, there have been periodic eruptions of discontent, notably the sizeable protests and serious riots of 2008. In fact, the 2008 disturbances appear to be the most significant and widespread in Tibet since 1959. Unsurprisingly, Beijing has blamed the Dalai Lama for fomenting the unrest, even though the exiled leader seems to have played no role whatsoever. Of course, Beijing is convinced that ultimate culpability lies with New Delhi: after all, without India's backing, the Dalai Lama would be rendered powerless.

A second Chinese irritant has emerged since 1998: India's ever-growing aspirations for regional and even global influence, its increasing accumulation of hard and soft power, combined with Beijing's perception of expanding strategic cooperation between New Delhi and other capitals. While India remains well behind its rival in most measures of military and economic power, the fact of stronger economic growth, increased military spending, and greater efforts at strategic

cooperation with other major powers has led China to take its rival across the Himalayas far more seriously. Especially worrisome to Beijing is New Delhi's improved security and diplomatic relations with the United States since 2005, although India's engagement with Japan and Australia is also concerning. China has been especially concerned with the creation in 2007 of the "Quadrilateral Security Dialogue"—a naval security dialogue that involves Australia, India, Japan and the United States.¹⁸ Indeed, Beijing interprets increased multilateral dialogue between these four states as the emergence of an anti-China alliance of democracies. In this context, the mid-2018 renaming of the Hawaii-headquartered U.S. Pacific Command as Indo-Pacific Command appears quite ominous to China.

Beijing's response to New Delhi's recent diplomatic rise has been a combination of blocking and managing. In some instances, China has sought to undermine India's efforts, a prime example being how Beijing has worked to frustrate New Delhi's quest to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In other instances, China has worked to coopt India into regional and global fora. For example, in 2017 Beijing facilitated New Delhi's admission to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (India was admitted along with Pakistan). China also works with India as members of the BRICS grouping, which also include Brazil and Russia. On the other hand, in 2010, China was instrumental in adding South Africa to BRICS, which diluted India's role by expanding membership to five states. It also cooperated with India in setting up the BRICS Development Bank (now known as the National Development Bank) in 2016. The first president of this bank was an Indian citizen. K.V. Kamath.

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An Enduring Rivalry?

In late April of 2018, Prime Minister Modi met with President Xi Jinping at an "informal summit" in Wuhan. Following this two-day meeting, the two sides affirmed their interest in maintaining peace along their disputed Himalayan border. Significantly, they also agreed to pursue a joint economic project in Afghanistan in an attempt to stabilize the country.¹⁹ It is important to note that even before the summit meeting in Wuhan, India had sent a costly signal to the PRC as it involved proffering conciliatory language to appease Beijing: the Ministry of External Affairs dissuaded the Dalai Lama and his followers from holding a rally in New Delhi commemorating 60 years of their exile in India. It also

admonished Indian officials not to attend the rally at this “sensitive time” in Sino-Indian relations.²⁰

For the past decade or so, a variety of Indian regimes had permitted the Dalai Lama and his followers to hold meetings and travel freely across the country. Indeed, not since the visit of Li Peng in December 1991 had India seriously restricted the activities of the Tibetan exile community.²¹ Consequently, the decision to curb the activities of the Dalai Lama and his supporters on the eve of the Wuhan meeting clearly departed from recent precedent.

The bonhomie at Wuhan and efforts at cooperation in Afghanistan notwithstanding, both sides will, in the foreseeable future, tread warily and cautiously in their dealings with each other.²² The PRC will remain preoccupied with the current presence and the future of the Dalai Lama in India; it will have to cope with various domestic challenges including slowing economic growth; and it will have to deal with the Trump administration’s unpredictability on a range of issues. India, in turn, is in no position to provoke the PRC either. Prime Minister Modi is focused on the April-May 2019 Indian General Election and can thereby ill-afford to precipitate another crisis along India’s Himalayan borders. More to the point, India faces significant gaps in its military preparedness: its air force, for example, is acutely short of combat aircrafts. Of a sanctioned strength of 45 squadrons, it currently has a mere 31 in a state of operational readiness. Under these circumstances, New Delhi is hardly in a position to adopt a confrontational posture toward the PRC.

What about beyond the immediate future? Despite their willingness to cooperate in certain arenas, it is unlikely that Beijing and New Delhi can find a pathway to amicably terminate their rivalry anytime soon. Both states have self-images as great powers in Asia and have mostly incompatible visions of regional and global order. New Delhi, for the most part, accepts the central tenets of the Western-dominated global order and institutions. At most, it seeks some changes in those arrangements to make them more equitable and to give

India a greater role. Beijing, however, has a more revisionist vision in which it seeks to fundamentally challenge Western and more specifically American dominance, especially in Asia. Consequently, even if they can avoid a significant military confrontation, at best they can arrive at a *modus vivendi*.

That, in turn, raises a critical question: How is the Sino-Indian rivalry likely to evolve? The extant literature on rivalries suggests a number of different possibilities.²³ It could end violently with the PRC inflicting a decisive defeat on India. This possibility is somewhat unlikely as this dyad involves two nuclear-armed

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rivals. It is hard to envisage a scenario where the PRC might launch a massive conventional assault on Indian forces along the Himalayas. Such a move could escalate in ways that neither side may be able to control. Indeed, if the recent history of Sino-Indian tensions and crises constitute a guide, such an outcome seems extremely unlikely. Both sides appear to be cognizant of the risks of a wider conflagration in the event that either party chooses to widen a local conflict.

A second possibility would involve one of the two parties accepting a subordinate status. This scenario, in all likelihood, would involve India yielding to the PRC on its territorial claims. It is difficult to visualize any Indian government making such a concession. A far weaker India successfully resisted making such a territorial compromise in the 1960s. Despite the PRC's superior military capabilities, it is unlikely that it can coerce India into making significant territorial concessions. Consequently, the territorial dimension of the rivalry is likely to persist into the foreseeable future.

A third possibility, which is the most likely outcome, is a continuation of the rivalry. India may adopt a more accommodative stance on some bilateral questions but is most unlikely to dispense with its wariness about the PRC. While we envisage the rivalry persisting, the two parties will also pursue contingent cooperation when they find overlapping interests. Consequently, on certain global issues, where their national interests converge, they will coordinate their policies. For example, in the arena of climate change, since both countries face serious vulnerabilities, they may well act in concert. Despite such coordination, the underlying sources of the rivalry are likely to persist fraught with the possibility of escalation as the PRC continues to probe Indian preparedness along the Himalayan border.

The Rivalry Ahead

The coming months should provide important clues about which possible trajectory the Himalayan Impasse might take in the coming years. Of course, the future will not be written solely by China and India. Exogenous events and other actors will impact the course of the rivalry. Among other matters, the policies that the Trump administration pursues toward Pakistan could have important ramifications for the Sino-Indian rivalry. In January 2018, the United States suspended security assistance to Pakistan because of the latter's failure to rein in a range of terrorist groups operating from its soil.²⁴ In its wake, the PRC has sought to enter the breach.²⁵ If the Sino-Pakistani security nexus tightens in the foreseeable future, it may have an adverse impact on the Sino-Indian rivalry. Indian policymakers, who already view this relationship with some misgivings, may become more anxious because of the security ramifications of a closer Sino-Pakistani link.

In a related vein, the future of American policy toward Afghanistan could also have implications for the Sino-Indian rivalry. If the Trump administration shrinks

the U.S. security commitment to Afghanistan, the Indo-Pakistani rivalry in the country is bound to intensify. Under those circumstances, it is difficult to see how the promise of Sino-Indian cooperation in Afghanistan can possibly come to fruition. Islamabad, through the use of proxy forces, wields much influence in the country. It has often thwarted the U.S. goal of bringing about a broadly inclusive, stable and economically viable Afghanistan. With a reduced American presence in the country, it will look askance at and seek to undermine any shared attempt by the PRC and India to expand their role in Afghanistan. This, in turn, could place the PRC in a quandary: it would be torn between its loyalty to its “all-weather ally,” Pakistan, and its interest in stabilizing a war-torn country near its borders.

Meanwhile, President Trump’s May 2018 decision to pull the United States out of the Iran nuclear agreement has reverberated around the Middle East and beyond. Overlooked in much of the discussion of the ramifications of this decision is the likely Chinese reaction. In all likelihood, the PRC will have no compunctions about continuing its ties with Iran. In fact, there is every reason to believe that it will seek to expand its influence in the country. This, in turn, could contribute to a new arena for Sino-Indian competition because, over the past decade, India has carefully cultivated a robust diplomatic, trade and even strategic relationship with Iran. Consequently, it will likely redouble its efforts to ensure

that its standing in Iran does not erode because of China’s attempts to woo it.

Finally, the role of the Tibetan diaspora should not be overlooked—actions by Tibetans, whether in exile or in China, could also elevate tensions. What might provoke protests or acts of confrontation by Tibetans? Any number of triggers could do so, including the death of the elderly and increasingly frail Dalai Lama. At 82 years of age, the religious leader is widely revered by Tibetan Buddhists, both inside and outside the borders of the

If a Sino-Indian crisis were to erupt against a backdrop of instability in Tibet, escalation is possible.

PRC. His passing could prompt emotional expressions of grief or potent demonstrations of defiance. And the situation could be further inflamed if China’s coercive apparatus responds with heavy-handedness. Turmoil in Tibet would almost certainly strain relations between China and India. In sum, decisions by other states as well as non-state actors and events beyond their control may confound the best laid plans of Beijing and New Delhi to manage their bilateral rivalry.

The PRC leadership, despite the degree of control it has achieved in Tibet, still perceives the region to be a source of strategic vulnerability. Consequently, if another crisis were to erupt in Sino-Indian relations against a backdrop of

renewed political instability in Tibet, it could be laden with the possibility of escalation.

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