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## **Is India Underbalancing China?**

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Is India doing enough to balance China since the deadly border clash in the Galwan Valley in 2020? This article reviews (1) the adequacy of Indian resources devoted to national defense, (2) the allocation of those resources to confront the multitude of threats that India faces, (3) the efficiency that India turns resource expenditure into military capability, and (4) the willingness and success of India in seeking international partnerships to assist in its national defense. It shows that India was underbalancing China prior to 2020 and likely continues to underbalance post-Galwan.

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## IS INDIA UNDERBALANCING CHINA?

‘India’s borders are completely safe,’ India’s then-home minister Rajnath Singh told an audience in 2017. ‘China has started to understand that India is no longer weak. Its strength has grown.’<sup>1</sup> Singh, who shifted to the defense ministry in 2019, returned to emphasizing these themes in subsequent years. In 2022, he explained, ‘It is the result of the last eight years [of Prime Minister Modi’s policy] that India is no longer weak.’<sup>2</sup> In 2024, Singh again stressed, ‘Even our neighbouring nations used to think they could attack India anytime they want, but India is no longer a weak nation.’<sup>3</sup> Singh’s confidence appears reflected in popular sentiment. Large majorities of Indians say India would defeat Pakistan and China in the event of war with either rival state.<sup>4</sup>

Are they right? India is stronger today than it was in the past, but is it sufficiently strong to defeat aggression from its neighbors?

This essay assesses these questions with particular attention to whether Indian defense and diplomatic efforts in the Modi era meet the definition of underbalancing, a concept generated by international relations scholars to describe situations in which a foreign policy response is incommensurate with a rising external threat. It does so by introducing that concept, before turning to an assessment of Indian behavior before and after the deadly border clashes with China in 2020. It will focus on four categories of effort to assess India’s response: (1) the adequacy of Indian resources devoted to national defense, (2) the allocation of those resources to confront the multitude of threats that India faces, (3) the efficiency in which India turns resource expenditure into military capability, and (4) the willingness and success of India in seeking international partnerships to assist in its national defense.

Collectively, these inquiries show that India’s own behavior since the Galwan Valley clash of 2020 indicates that it had been underbalancing against China prior to that event. After 2020, the evidence is more ambiguous but underbalancing likely has continued. India has increased resource expenditure on defense, but modestly. Instead of a sharp increase in national defense effort, New Delhi has prioritized re-allocating existing resources previously devoted to other threats and pursuing defense reforms to permit existing resources to be used more efficiently. Additionally, India has shown a continued willingness to build external partnerships with an aim of managing the China threat, even as it remains somewhat wary of provoking Chinese aggression through overly rapid deepening of its defense ties overseas. These collective efforts may be sufficient to balance China, but they entail continued risks. Specifically, India’s re-allocation of resources away from other threats may prove dangerous. Additionally, India’s partial reliance on external partnerships could be perilous if those partners are distracted by other priorities during some future Indian time of need.

### Underbalancing in Theory and History

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<sup>1</sup> Press Trust of India, “After Doklam, Rajnath Singh says China understands that India is no more weak,” *India Today*, October 15, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Press Information Bureau, Government of India, “India no longer weak, it is strong & well-equipped to deal with all challenges, says Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh in Udaipur, Rajasthan,” August 30, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> ANI, “India’s global perception has completely changed: Rajnath Singh,” *Economic Times*, August 23, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Clary, et al., “Confidence and Nationalism in Modi’s India,” The Stimson Center, August 17, 2022.

A major emphasis of theorizing in international relations scholarship—one with considerable real-world implications—is whether and how states respond to changing international threats. States, according to these theorists, might balance against rising powers or alternatively they might bandwagon on their side. Other observers argued that more common still were responses of hiding ‘in the hope that the storm would blow over’ or attempting to ‘pass the buck’ to some other power to do the hard work of confronting a rising power.<sup>5</sup>

One important possibility might be that states would respond to rising threats inadequately—thus exposing themselves or others to predation. Randall Schweller called this phenomenon ‘underbalancing.’ Underbalancing occurs, he explained, when a potential balancer confronts ‘a dangerous and unappeasable aggressor’ and when that potential balancer’s efforts are ‘essential to deter or defeat’ the aggressor, yet the potential balancer does not muster adequate efforts to confront the threat. Schweller was primarily interested in the behavior of Western powers when he formulated his ideas about underbalancing, which he explained often arose during periods of inadequate elite cohesion. It is clear elsewhere in his writings that Schweller believed Indian foreign policy behavior on at least some prior occasions to be consistent with his theory.<sup>6</sup>

Schweller’s work identifies both a behavior of interest (underbalancing) and an explanation for it (elite discord). Some Indian scholars have acknowledged prior Indian underbalancing, but they disagree with Schweller’s causal explanation. Rajesh Rajagopalan has written on an especially severe historical case of underbalancing: that of India’s inadequate response to a rising China in the 1950s, which ultimately contributed to a decisive Indian military defeat in the 1962 Sino-Indian war. Rajagopalan compellingly argues that India’s problem was not elite disunity. Rather, the problem for India prior to 1962 was that elite consensus involved a determination that China *did not require* immediate balancing.<sup>7</sup> Rajagopalan argues elsewhere that India continued to underbalance against China at least through the 1980s—as evidenced among other things by its slow and half-hearted effort to build up a nuclear deterrent to counter China’s acquisition of nuclear weapons in 1964.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, Rajagopalan has advanced a related but distinct critique of India’s China policy. In a 2020 article, he proposed that India’s approach to China might best be labeled ‘evasive balancing,’ which Rajagopalan defined as ‘a policy of balancing while attempting to reassure the target that one is not doing so.’ While Rajagopalan was sympathetic to the Indian need to avoid provoking China, he was skeptical that India’s mixed strategy would prove viable, in part because of the enormous difficulties associated with reassuring adversaries of benign intent.<sup>9</sup>

If India has underbalanced in the past, does it continue to do so today?

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Schroeder, ‘Historical Reality vs. Neorealist Theory,’ *International Security* 19/1 (1994): 108-148; Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder, ‘Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,’ *International Organization* 44/2 (Spring 1990): 137-168; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley 1979); Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton UP, 2006), 69, 104-5.

<sup>7</sup> Rajesh Rajagopalan, ‘Why India Under-balanced against China in the 1950s: Evaluating Neoclassical Realist Theory,’ in *Facets of India’s Security: Essays for C. Uday Bhaskar* (New York: Routledge 2022), 28.

<sup>8</sup> Rajesh Rajagopalan, ‘Realism and Indian Foreign Policy,’ in *New Directions in Indian Foreign Policy*, eds. Amitabh Mattoo and Happyman Jacob (New Delhi: Manohar, 2013), 29-30.

<sup>9</sup> Rajesh Rajagopalan, ‘Evasive Balancing: India’s Unviable Indo-Pacific Strategy,’ *International Affairs* 96/1 (2020): 75-91.

## Modi's Defense Policy: An Assessment

When Narendra Modi took office in 2014, he inherited a defense policy that already was straining to deal with a more assertive China along India's frontiers. Pinpointing a date for this adverse shift in Sino-Indian relations is necessarily arbitrary, though many identify a 2007 confrontation over a series of Indian bunkers built near the India-China-Bhutan trijunction as a disjuncture point.<sup>10</sup> Vijay Gokhale, who was India's foreign secretary and ambassador in Beijing during Modi's prime ministership, assessed that relations worsened somewhat later, with 'China's increasing transgressions and attempts at coercion in the border areas since 2008–2009.'<sup>11</sup>

While the beginning of this cycle is hard to date precisely, its subsequent evolution is clearer. Border standoffs before and after Modi became prime minister—near the Depsang area in 2013, in the Chumar vicinity in 2014, and close to Burtse in 2015—punctuated the mid-2010s.<sup>12</sup> While relations worsened, China did not abandon a series of confidence-building measures it had agreed to with India in the 1990s. Indeed, in 2013, Beijing and New Delhi negotiated a new agreement in what would prove to be a failed attempt to arrest the slide in bilateral ties.

Rather than aberrations, these troubles were followed by a standoff in 2017 at another site near the tri-border junction of India-China-Bhutan, in what many commentators viewed as 'the most serious military confrontation between the two countries on the border' in nearly three decades.<sup>13</sup> That confrontation resolved peacefully—an outcome which Rajnath Singh subsequently attributed to India's new strength.

Despite these prior troubles, 2020 proved to be a watershed year. This was in large part because of the fatal clash in the Galwan Valley, the first violent deaths on the Sino-Indian frontier since 1975. Even dispassionate observers, such as former foreign secretary and former national security advisor Shivshankar Menon, perceived a 'barbaric' Chinese break with the prior *modus vivendi*.<sup>14</sup> Yet the killings were not the only discontinuity associated with the clashes in eastern Ladakh, of which the Galwan Valley was merely one site of contestation. As Menon explained subsequently, 'For the first time, the Chinese tried to change the status quo in several places along the line in their favor, and to stay permanently on what we considered our side of the line in places that they had never been before, and to prevent us from patrolling areas which we had traditionally patrolled. And they did this simultaneously along the line in several places, which suggests a level of coordination, planning, and high-level approval, which had not been the case in previous such

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<sup>10</sup> Nirmalya Banerjee and Amalendu Kundu, 'Chinese Troops Destroy Indian Posts, Bunker,' *Times of India*, December 1, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Vijay Gokhale, 'A Historical Evaluation of China's India Policy: Lessons for India-China Relations,' Carnegie India, December 13, 2022, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Shibani Mehta, 'Impasse at the LAC: An Examination of the 2013, 2014, and 2015 Standoffs,' *Carnegie India*, August 31, 2023, <https://carnegieindia.org/2023/08/31/impasse-at-lac-examination-of-2013-2014-and-2015-standoffs-pub-90447>.

<sup>13</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, 'Stability in the Secondary Strategic Direction: China and the Border Dispute with India after 1962,' in *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations*, eds. Kanti Bajpai, Selina Ho, and Manjari Chatterjee Miller, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Jyoti Malhotra, 'Killing of Indian soldiers 'barbaric', China has broken past agreements, says ex-NSA Menon,' *ThePrint*, July 12, 2020.

incidents.<sup>15</sup> This in turn triggered a policy shift. As Gokhale has observed, after the 2020 clashes, ‘the ambiguity that prevailed in India’s decision-making and strategic circles as to whether China is a partner or a rival has been replaced by strategic clarity. China’s behavior is now perceived as adversarial and few are willing to give it the benefit of the doubt.’<sup>16</sup>

What is the appropriate response following such a determination? Schweller and most other underbalancing theorists have had the advantage of considering national responses many years after the fact. In other words, they benefited from observing whether adversaries attempted aggression and if status quo competitors defeated such attempts. To employ the underbalancing concept contemporaneously and prospectively requires other metrics of adequacy than those employed by researchers focused solely on the past. In this piece, I offer four interrelated measures to assess current and near-term usable power.<sup>17</sup> Is India devoting sufficient national resources toward defense? Is it allocating those resources optimally against potential threats? Is it using those allocated resources efficiently? And, if domestic efforts alone are insufficient, is it securing foreign help where needed? This essay now turns to examining India’s post-Galwan policy along these dimensions.

### **Adequacy of Effort**

In the fall of 2019, five years into Modi’s term and less than a year before the Galwan clashes, a team of U.S.-based researchers released a long assessment of India’s defense posture toward China. They argued, ‘The trend lines in the India-China military equation are broadly negative.’ Despite some awareness of this problem among Indian planners, the U.S. researchers further assessed, ‘Delhi’s ongoing efforts, though promising, will not fundamentally change the current trend lines in the India-China military equation.’<sup>18</sup>

In India, there was acknowledgement of these challenges. Many pointed to problems with the defense budget. Lt. Gen. (retd.) D. S. Hooda, who had led the Indian Army’s northern command with responsibilities toward China and Pakistan, observed in 2018 that the budget would create ‘serious issues with modernisation as well as with infrastructure building’ along the border.<sup>19</sup> The serving vice chief of the Army soon told a parliamentary committee that the government’s budget allocations had ‘dashed our hopes’ for modernization.<sup>20</sup> The following year’s budget while nominally larger overall, barely kept up with inflation. Laxman Behera argued similarly, ‘The funds

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<sup>15</sup> Vijay Gokhale, Shivshankar Menon, and Tanvi Madan, ‘A big-picture look at the India-China relationship,’ *The Brookings Institution*, September 20, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-big-picture-look-at-the-india-china-relationship/>.

<sup>16</sup> Gokhale, ‘A Historical Evaluation...’

<sup>17</sup> Other metrics might help assess latent power not immediately usable for war, but on most of these China fares even better. Also see Ashley Tellis, Janice Bially, Christopher Layne, and Melissa McPherson, *National Power in the Postindustrial Age* (Santa Monica: RAND 2001); Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Kliman, Iskander Rehman, Kristine Lee and Joshua Fitt, ‘Imbalance of Power: India’s Military Choices in an Era of Strategic Competition with China,’ Center for a New American Security, October 23, 2019.

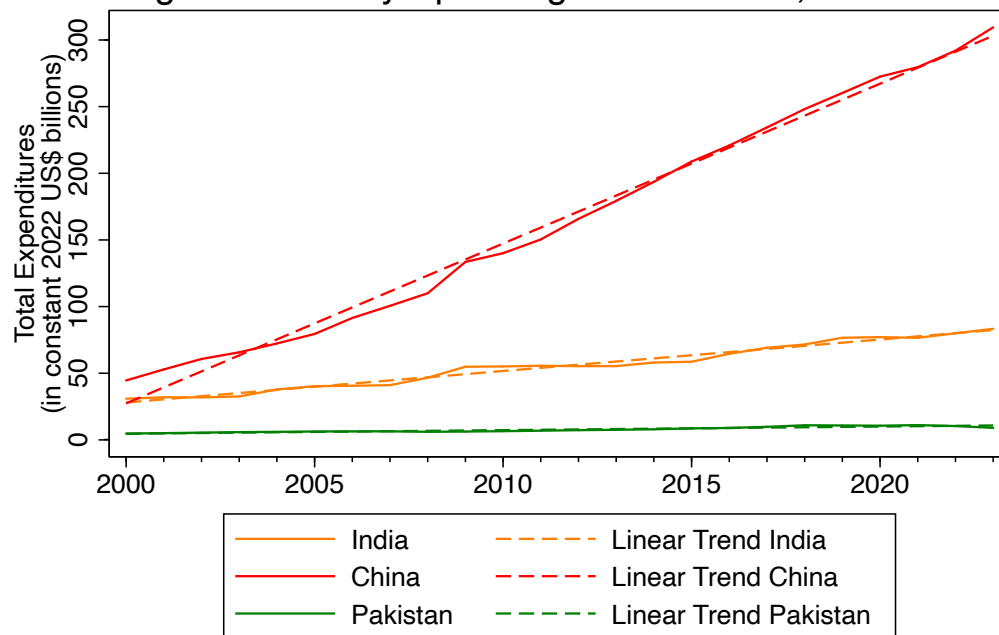
<sup>19</sup> Lt. Gen. (retd.) D. S. Hooda, ‘With This Defence Budget, Forces Will Have Serious Problem in Modernisation: Lt Gen DS Hooda,’ February 2, 2018, <https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/with-this-defence-budget-forces-will-have-serious-problems-with-modernization-lt-gen-ds-hooda-1648505.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Imran Ahmed Siddiqui, ‘Officer flags big chinks in army's armour,’ *The Telegraph* (India), March 14, 2018.

are inadequate for the defence ministry given the huge backlog of defence modernization...<sup>21</sup> Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan assessed in 2019, ‘the current defence allocation is far too meager’ and speculated that ‘India’s much softer approach to China over the last year may very well be dictated by the realization that New Delhi simply does not have the military capacity to do anything else.’<sup>22</sup>

There is little evidence of an upward discontinuity in Indian defense expenditures since Galwan. The increase in defense spending in constant terms since 2020 is consistent with prior short-term increases, and smaller—both in absolute magnitude and as a percentage of defense spending—than other increases that have occurred in the past two decades. This continuity of modest, gradual defense spending increases occurs in the context of a large and widening asymmetry in expenditure when compared to China. In 2000, China’s total military expenditures were roughly 1.5 times that of India. By 2023, that gap had widened: Beijing today spends more than 3.5 times what New Delhi does (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Military Spending in South Asia, 2000-2023



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024

This business-as-usual approach explains why Indian commentators still talk about defense in terms of scarcity even years after Galwan. Thus Lt. Gen. (retd.) Kapil Aggarwal observed in 2023, ‘Defence spending, whether as a percentage of GDP or on pro rata [percentage] basis is decreasing gradually and continuously. The spending is lower in comparison to most countries of interest, even though India has higher security concerns.’<sup>23</sup> Lt. Gen. (retd.) Anil Ahuja assessed recent budgets

<sup>21</sup> Sandeep Unnithan, ‘Defence Budget 2019: Why Highest Ever Rs. 3 Lakh Crore Grant Is Still Not Enough,’ *India Today*, February 1, 2019.

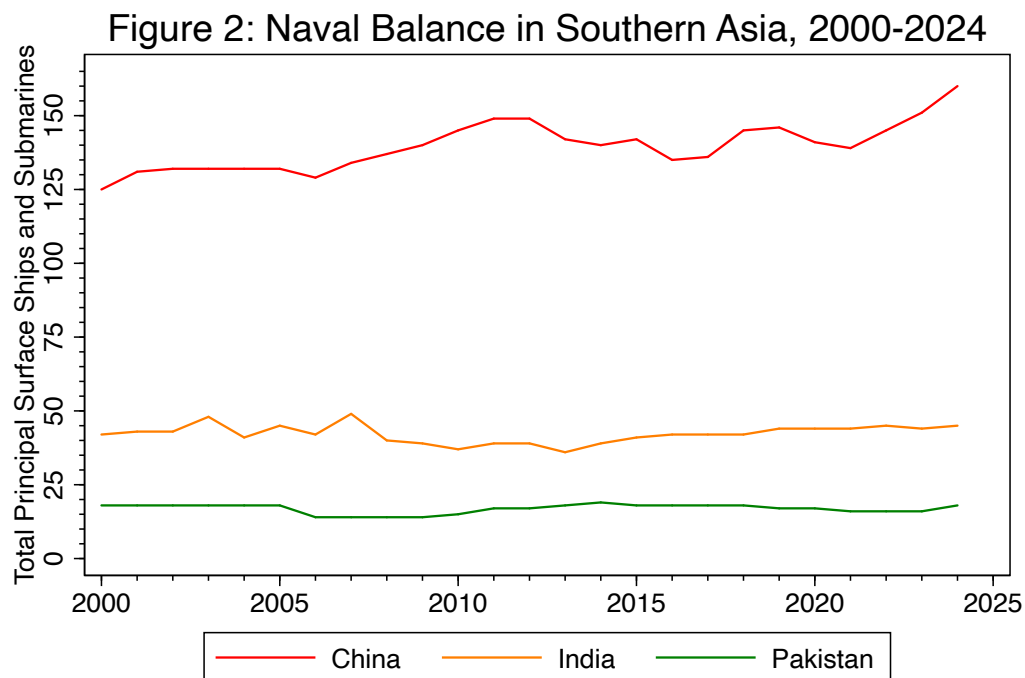
<sup>22</sup> Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, ‘Why India’s New Defence Budget Falls Short,’ Observer Research Foundation, February 14, 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/why-indias-new-defence-budget-falls-short-48077/>.

<sup>23</sup> Lt. Gen. Kapil Aggarwal, ‘Analysis of Allocations for Defence: Union Budget 2023-24,’ India Foundation, March 1, 2023, <https://indiafoundation.in/articles-and-commentaries/analysis-of-allocations-for-defence-union-budget-2023-24/>.

reflect simply ‘more of the same,’ with a continuing ‘disconnect between national geopolitical aims, aspirations, and the capabilities required to be created over a given time frame, and the resources being provisioned for the same.’<sup>24</sup>

Any examination of resources though must be cognizant of potential disconnects between inputs and outputs. A fuller discussion of India’s efficiency in turning power potential into power appears in a later section of this article, but for now it is worth looking at two outputs of interest for contemporary warfare: India’s ability to field (1) principal naval surface combatants and submarines and (2) military aircraft. For both of these capabilities, I will compare India to its principal rivals, China and Pakistan.

Comparing the naval balance, India’s is far ahead of Pakistan quantitatively, but far behind China (see Figure 2). India appears to be falling behind in the maritime domain rather than catching up. China’s tally of principal surface combatants and submarines has increased by 28 percent since 2000, while India’s has increased by 7 percent. If one peers at more qualitative indicators, such as total tonnage of principal combatants, however, the asymmetric growth becomes more evident. India’s total surface tonnage—capturing the size and implicitly variety of armaments aboard ships—has increased meaningfully since 2000: more than doubling. The problem is China’s surface fleet has expanded astronomically, with principal combatants now more than quadruple the tonnage of equivalent Chinese vessels in 2000.<sup>25</sup>



Source: IISS, *Military Balance*, various years

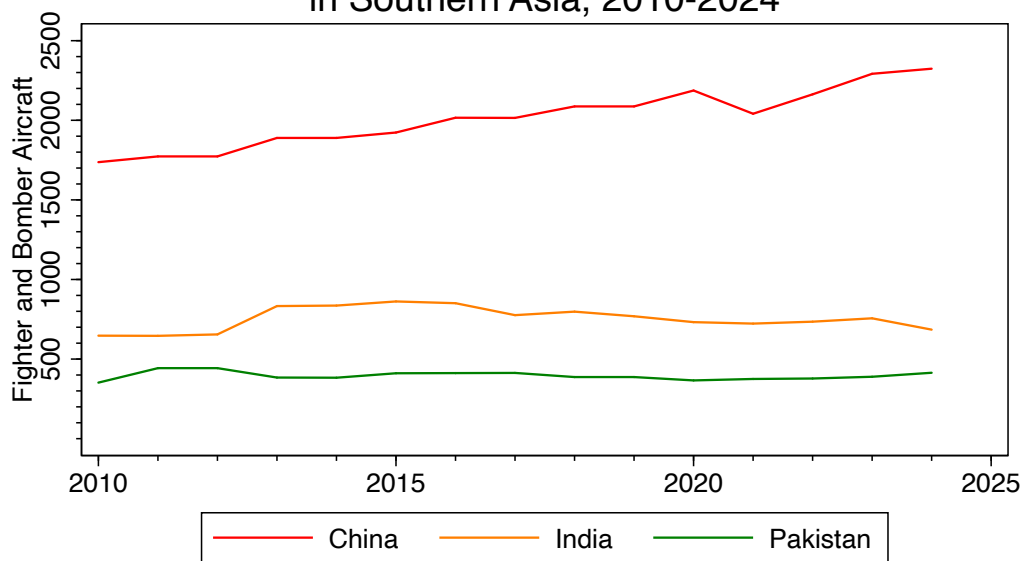
The picture for the air balance is much the same. In Figure 3, I have shown estimates for combat aircraft since 2010. (Uncertainty over the size of the People’s Liberation Army Air Force

<sup>24</sup> Anil Ahuja, ‘Defence Budget 2023-24: More of the Same,’ *Policy Brief* 8/12 (February 23, 2023), [https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads\\_dpg/publication\\_file/defence-budget-2023-2024-more-of-the-same-4856.pdf](https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/uploads_dpg/publication_file/defence-budget-2023-2024-more-of-the-same-4856.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Author’s calculations based on IISS, *Military Balance*, various years.

prior to 2010 results in large swings in international estimates before that date.) Here, too, India has a sustained and meaningful numerical advantage over Pakistan and a substantial quantitative disadvantage compared to China, one that is larger in 2024 than it was in 2010. Restricting the comparison to just advanced fighters (so-called fourth-generation or later aircraft) does not improve matters from India's vantage since the Sino-Indian air force ratios today inclusive and exclusive of older aircraft are virtually identical: more than 3:1 in China's favor.

**Figure 3: Fighter and Bomber Inventories in Southern Asia, 2010-2024**



Source: IISS, Military Balance, various years

Note: Includes air superiority, multirole, and ground-attack fighters; bombers; and naval aviation able to perform air superiority or ground attack missions

Overall, in total military expenditure, China spends more than 3.5 times as much as India, according to international estimates. In turn, China translates that spending advantage into more than 3 times as many combat aircraft as India and more than 3.5 times the number of principal surface and submarine combatants as India. Such crude measures obviously must come with many caveats about basing, normal deployment patterns, quality of equipment, and quality of personnel, among others. Yet they suggest that China's large apparent advantage in spending is not meaningfully mitigated by better Indian efficiency at turning funds into major combat systems.

There is another dimension where so-called internal balancing is possible if conventional military capability is inadequate: nuclear weapons. Since India overtly tested nuclear weapons in 1998, it has pursued an impressive qualitative modernization of its nuclear delivery vehicles alongside a slow but steady quantitative expansion of its nuclear warhead inventory. This has given New Delhi greater nuclear options against Pakistan, even as it continues to reach for credible minimum deterrence against China.<sup>26</sup> The nuclear gap between India and China is widening as Beijing has undergone a rapid nuclear expansion in recent years. Indian analysts have acknowledged some response will be necessary to this buildup but are fearful of a costly and counterproductive

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, "India's Counterforce Temptations: Strategic Dilemmas, Doctrine, and Capabilities," *International Security* 43/3 (winter 2018-2019): 110-150.



nuclear arms race.<sup>27</sup> In the last decade, then, there are few if any signs of India compensating for conventional weakness with nuclear advances.

Perhaps these indicators of Indian asymmetry elsewhere are compensated for by a manageable situation on the land border with China, which was after all the cause and sole domain of the 1962 war and all subsequent fatal clashes. Here the quantitative indicators appear more sanguine, but a deeper look promotes pessimism. The mountainous terrain on the border favors very localized landgrabs against lightly defended spots. This typically favors the aggressor who can move at a time and space of his choosing.<sup>28</sup> If such localized hostilities escalate, India has more forces near the border but China can much more quickly mobilize forces to the frontier.<sup>29</sup> China additionally has interior lines of communication atop the Tibetan plateau, while India would need to maneuver military forces along separated avenues of attack up substantial altitude gradients.<sup>30</sup> (Such altitude changes in turn create an issue for acclimatizing those mobilizing troops for India but not China.) Additionally, in a full-scale war, India has an acute strategic vulnerability since all inter-theater flows of manpower and materiel must go through the extraordinarily narrow, 22-kilometer wide Siliguri Corridor that connects India's northeast with the rest of India. India's narrow lines of communication at this point are extraordinarily susceptible to air and missile attacks as well as ground attack from China's Chumbi Valley. There is no equivalent vulnerability on the Chinese side. Any high-intensity fighting might also deplete Indian munitions stocks within a matter of weeks, which prior government audits have assessed are far below planning requirements.<sup>31</sup> China, with its extraordinary manufacturing base, likely would not face similar shortages in a war with India.<sup>32</sup>

In such a context, then, any Indian attempt to sustain military parity necessarily entails calculations about China's need to withhold a substantial portion of its potential combat power to focus on other threats—which in turn depends on variables only loosely under New Delhi's control, principally relations between Beijing and Washington. India made similar calculations in the early 1960s, only to find that Washington was distracted by the Cuban missile crisis during New Delhi's time of need. Additionally, while including the bulk of the Chinese force in calculating the balances of forces may seem to be an unnatural disadvantage for India in such arithmetic, the ratios are meaningfully worse if Pakistani forces are added. Pakistan's relations with China are stronger than they were in prior wars in 1962, 1965, and 1971 where Pakistan and China opted not to collaborate

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<sup>27</sup> Rajesh Kumar, "Deterrence in Asymmetries," Vivekananda International Foundation, September 12, 2022; Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "India's Changing Attitude Toward Nuclear Expansion," *NBR Special Report*, no. 109 (May 2024).

<sup>28</sup> Iskander Rehman, 'A Himalayan Challenge: India's Conventional Deterrent and the Role of Special Operations Forces along the Sino-Indian Border,' *Naval War College Review* 70/1 (2017): 108-110, 114.

<sup>29</sup> Nick Reynolds and Sidharth Kaushal, 'A Military Analysis of the Sino-Indian Border Clashes,' Royal United Services Institute, June 2, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Oriana Skylar Mastro and Arzan Tarapore, 'Asymmetric but Uneven: The China-India Conventional Military Balance,' in *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations*, eds. Kanti Bajpai, Selina Ho, and Manjari Chatterjee Miller (New York: Routledge, 2020), 245-6.

<sup>31</sup> Sushant Singh, 'Crisis in command: Indian military's stocks are running low,' *Deccan Herald*, May 21, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Chen, 'Why China's ammunition factories are being turned over to robots,' *South China Morning Post*, January 1, 2018.

on the battlefield against India.<sup>33</sup> How India allocates resources against those threats—separately or jointly—is the focus of the next section.

### **Allocation of Resources**

One of the most meaningful changes India has adopted since 2020 involves the reallocation of costly national security efforts—especially the peacetime deployments and orientations of Indian Army units—away from Pakistan and toward China. This calculated shift reflects the heightened China threat but does expose India to the possibility that its attempt to correct the balance with China might worsen the security posture arrayed against other threats.

India has fought major wars with two of its land-bordering neighbors, both of which remain as India’s rivals. This strategic position is made even more difficult by the fact that both neighbors are nuclear armed and complicated further still by China and Pakistan’s multi-decade defense partnership.

Before the 1962 war with China and arguably for several decades after, India was perceived to have prioritized its military to prepare for wars with Pakistan over China, even as the Indian military was mindful that both contingencies might occur. The worsening in Sino-Indian ties in the 2010s combined with India’s growing quantitative and qualitative advantages over Pakistan led to further evolution in that thinking. Thus, Army Chief General M. M. Naravane would say in January 2020, before Galwan, that ‘at one point of time’ Indian planning focused ‘more toward the western front,’ but ‘we feel now that both the western and the northern front are equally important.’ This had led the Army to begin ‘re-balancing’ away from the Pakistan toward the China front.<sup>34</sup> That process accelerated post-Galwan.

Yet the prioritization of resources between fronts during peacetime is not the only challenge India’s defense planners face. They must also contend with the possibility of simultaneous conflict on both fronts. While concerns about Sino-Pakistani collaboration are hardly new, in the last two decades these worries increasingly have been institutionalized in Indian war planning assumptions. Since 2009, the Indian defense minister’s operational directive to the military has instructed the armed forces to ‘be prepared to fight on both fronts simultaneously a war at 30 days (intense) and 60 days (normal) rates.’<sup>35</sup> In recent years, the senior-most officers in the Indian armed forces have stated repeatedly that they are preparing for such a two-front scenario.<sup>36</sup>

Being able to defeat opponents on both fronts simultaneously likely exceeds Indian capabilities today and the foreseeable future. The military has settled on a strategy of defeating the primary threat while holding the line against a secondary front in such a scenario, after which the roles might conceivably be reversed. As then-Army Chief M. M. Naravane explained six months before Galwan in January 2020, ‘Wherever the primary front is, the bulk of our forces and resources

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<sup>33</sup> Sameer Lalwani, ‘A Threshold Alliance: The China-Pakistan Military Relationship,’ *United States 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](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/sr-517_threshold-alliance-china-pakistan-military-relationship.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> ‘Gen MM Naravane's Full Press Conference Ahead of Army Day 2020,’ January 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGkcc8zajXU>.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in N. C. Vij, ‘Defending Land Frontiers,’ *National Security* [India] 1/1 (2018): 5.

<sup>36</sup> Piyush Gupta, ‘Army Chief Gen Pande Says India Is Prepared for Two-Front War,’ *Republic*, April 25, 2023; Rahul Singh, ‘In Stern Warning to Pak, Gen Rawat Says “India Capable of Handling Two-Front Threat”,’ *Hindustan Times*, September 3, 2020.

will be concentrated to deal with that threat. And on the other front we will adopt a more deterrent posture, so that we are not found wanting on either account.<sup>37</sup>

Importantly, while units, personnel, and equipment are a huge part of this challenge, they are not the only limiting factor. Historically the Indian defense establishment has not viewed it as ‘economically nor logistically feasible’ to hold large reserves of munitions, which in turn meant the military was only prepared for wars limited in intensity or duration.<sup>38</sup> This problem is doubly exacerbated if any future war is multifront since limited munitions stockpiles cannot be transferred from one front to another—the Indian Army’s stated plan prior to Galwan—without operational risk.<sup>39</sup> The extent to which the Indian Army has decided to increase its stockpile since 2020 given the heightened possibility of a two-front war is unclear from recent reporting, though statements by senior Indian military officers suggest planning assumptions may not include extended multi-month wars.<sup>40</sup>

In other areas, post-Galwan steps to address the China threat are clearer. Several years before Galwan, the government authorized the Indian Army to raise a dedicated mountain strike corps (17<sup>th</sup> corps) along the eastern front, a formation designed to be analogous to large offensive strike corps India had long maintained on the western border with Pakistan though organized and equipped for the unique terrain in India’s north and east. Yet the process of raising the corps—allocating personnel, equipment, and associated units to it—was drawn out. The process was halted around 2017 with only one of two planned divisions of troops attached to the planned corps command. The army argued there were insufficient funds for another division and quietly doubted whether two divisions could operate over the limited border infrastructure available at the time. The army, which had to prioritize building the new corps or to modernize and equip existing formations opted to prioritize the latter in the late 2010s.<sup>41</sup> As Gen. Naravane would describe following his retirement, of the Army’s 38 divisions, 25 divisions were responsible for the Pakistan threat. ‘The situation was especially precarious in Eastern Ladakh’ were ‘just a single division (3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division) was responsible for defending an 800-km border with no units in reserve.’<sup>42</sup> This especially precarious location was the site of the fatal 2020 clashes.

Since Galwan, India relocated a divisional headquarters from the Rashtriya Rifles—the so-called Counter-Insurgency Force (Uniform)—along with two of its associated brigades to reinforce Eastern Ladakh. It has reoriented the 1 Corps in Mathura, which previously was a strike corps focused on Pakistan, so that the primary role of its associated infantry and mountain divisions is now to prepare for contingencies in Ladakh. The armored division previously attached to 1 Corps

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<sup>37</sup> ‘Gen MM Naravane’s Full Press Conference Ahead of Army Day 2020,’ January 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGkcc8zajXU>; also see Sushant Singh, ‘The Challenge of a Two-Front War,’ The Stimson Center, April 19, 2021, <https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/The-Challenge-of-a-Two.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Rajat Pandit, ‘Army Stocking Up Munitions for 40-Day War,’ *Times of India*, January 27, 2020; Singh, ‘The Challenge of a Two-Front War.’

<sup>39</sup> Snehes Alex Philip, ‘Arsenal for Pakistan prepped, Army now focuses on ammo reserves to deal with China,’ *ThePrint*, September 25, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Press Trust of India, ‘CDS General Chauhan says lesson for India from Ukraine war is...’ *Hindustan Times*, March 3, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Sushant Singh, ‘What happened to the Mountain Strike Corps?’ *Indian Express*, June 18, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> M. M. Naravane, ‘Rising to the Challenge: Rebalancing the Indian Army,’ in *Momentous Changes: Defence Reforms, Military Transformation, and India’s New Strategic Posture*, eds. Anit Mukherjee, Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, and Nishant Rajeev (New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, 2023), 43.

has now been placed as a reserve force under control of Indian Army headquarters since its heavy armor and associated equipment will have limited utility in the high Himalayas. The 1 Corps remains what the Army calls a ‘dual-tasked formation’ and has a secondary responsibility of preparing for Pakistan contingencies. Yet given the very different terrains, it seems impossible for there not to be some degradation in its ability to perform the Pakistan mission as it trains and equips for mountain warfare. The 14 Division previously tasked to prepare for Pakistan contingencies is converting into a mountain division so that it can focus on the so-called Central Sector of the Sino-Indian frontier. This then means the 17 Mountain Strike Corps, previously envisioned in the early 2010s as a strike corps for the whole China border, can focus on the Eastern Sector of that frontier. Additionally, it too was assigned an additional division, bringing it to the force level originally desired at its creation before that that effort had been paused in the late 2010s. Another division in Assam that had previously focused on counterinsurgency has been reoriented to the China boundary, but remains in its prior locations.<sup>43</sup>

These post-Galwan moves largely involve relocating or reorienting existing units, not raising new ones. As Walter Ladwig has observed, ‘If you’re going to take troops who are previously trained for plains operations and reequip them and reorient them for operations in the mountains, that’s a long-term commitment and that’s a long-term change. But that being said, this is simply moving pieces around.’<sup>44</sup> Some former Indian army officers have argued that India requires at least 5 more divisions (43 in total) to defend its borders adequately and perhaps 11 more than that (54 total divisions) for it to have adequate ability to conduct limited offensive operations as well as defensive duties.<sup>45</sup> Additionally some of the Indian manpower used to plug prior gaps on the China frontier had recently been involved in counterinsurgency in Kashmir or India’s Northeast. If those internal conflicts worsen in the future, then Indian security planners will have to balance dangers. The Indian Army has been called into quell recent violence in Manipur, for instance, even as thousands of additional paramilitaries have also been redeployed.<sup>46</sup>

Indian force planners also appear to be making a calculated bet on Pakistan’s likely trajectory. This, in turn, requires assessments of how aggressive Pakistan will be in the future as well as how capable even an aggressive Pakistan might be. The Army chief at the time of much of this rebalancing, General Naravane who served in that role from 2019 to 2022, wrote following his retirement that ‘the balance of power between India and Pakistan has decisively shifted in India’s favour’ over the last two decades and that this trend was likely to continue. In this context, India and Pakistan reached an agreement in February 2021 to revive the ceasefire along the Line of Control in Kashmir, which vastly reduced the firing and other forms of ceasefire violations that had disturbed the Kashmir divide for the previous decade. The balance of power and the ceasefire, Naravane wrote, ‘have enabled the Indian armed forces, especially the army, to recalibrate their responses and review the manner in which the forces are arrayed.’<sup>47</sup> Had India been overbalancing against Pakistan prior to 2021? That is not the focus of this study, but Indian efforts to improve the balance of forces

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<sup>43</sup> Naravane, ‘Rising to the Challenge’; Snehes Alex Philip, ‘These are the key changes Army has made in Ladakh to counter China in summer,’ *ThePrint*, April 12, 2021; Manjeet Negi, ‘6 Indian Army Divisions assigned to China border from Pakistan front,’ *India Today*, May 15, 2022.

<sup>44</sup> Walter Ladwig, et al., ‘India-China security competition on land, at sea, in space, and beyond,’ Brookings Institution, October 4, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Singh, ‘The Challenge of a Two-Front War.’

<sup>46</sup> Sumir Karmakar, ‘Army called in to control violence in Manipur; 9,000 people shifted to safer places,’ *Deccan Herald*, May 4, 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Naravane, ‘Rising to the Challenge.’

arrayed against China has meant a worsening of that balance against Pakistan. Such tough choices are inevitable when total resources expended are insufficient to maintain presence against an old threat as a new threat rises. One possible way to square the metaphorical circle would be if India were able to use existing inputs more efficiently. Has that occurred?

### **Efficiency of Effort**

Many Indian commentators take as a given that other priorities will continue to prevent meaningful increases in defense spending. For such commentators, defense reforms hold the promise of being able to do more with less. ‘Instead of complaining about [a] declining defence budget, which is unlikely to change anything, the need of the hour is to double down on defence reforms with strategic foresight.’ argued Harsh Pant in 2019.<sup>48</sup> In this vein, three sets of national defense reforms seem especially important for the post-Galwan environment, even though many of them have their genesis before 2020: (1) emphasis on improving inter-service cooperation to improve military efficiency; (2) attempts to acquire a growing share of defense equipment from Indian suppliers; and (3) efforts to bring down defense salary and pension costs. I examine each in turn.

*India’s Pursues Military Jointness:* Since the 1980s, when the United States initiated a series of reforms to enhance its ability to conduct joint military operations, most militaries have concluded there are considerable benefits on the modern battlefield to be gained from elements of separate military services cooperating during peacetime, crisis, and war. Such joint efforts might permit, for example, ground forces to use airpower to substitute for artillery in remote areas. Operating together under difficult conditions requires extensive experience training together, however, and consequently requires enormous peacetime work to break down stovepipes across military services. Already exercising combined arms operations for army units—the fusion of armor, artillery, and infantry branches—is difficult for even highly trained militaries, adding a joint, inter-service component multiplies that difficulty.

In the United States, jointness involved several major reforms, but two of the most significant were the elevation of the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff position from serving as the first among equal service chiefs to becoming the principal military advisor to the president and the creation of joint theater combatant commands that report directly to the secretary of defense instead of through their respective service chiefs. These American reforms served as a major model for India as it considered its own more recent steps.

India has made meaningful moves toward jointness, especially under the Modi government, but still has several unimplemented reforms to achieve its stated aspirations in this area. After two decades of consideration, India appointed a four-star chief of defense staff (CDS) with important but limited authority over the service chiefs in January 2020. The first holder of that position, Gen. Bipin Rawat, died in a helicopter crash on December 8, 2021, before the completion of his term. Rawat’s sudden death combined with confusion about how to best structure the authorities of the new CDS appear to have led the Modi government to delay appointment of his successor, and the position remained vacant for nearly ten months until Gen. Anil Chauhan became the second CDS on September 30, 2022.

Yet confusion remains about how the chief of defense staff’s authorities should be structured and exercised. India has created a new department of military affairs within the ministry of defense to help provide the CDS with the necessary bureaucracy to oversee the military services—yet this structure has proven difficult to build and operate in practice. An incumbent CDS

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<sup>48</sup> Harsh Pant, ‘We need not whine about India’s small defense budget,’ *Mint*, July 10, 2019.

was supposed to shepherd the creation of integrated theater commands, but here India's limited force size complicates issues as the air force especially is wary to allot its limited combat aircraft to just one theater and would like the ability to retain service control over the apportionment of scarce high-value assets. The two-front threat combined with India's defense resource scarcity thus complicate the effort to secure potential efficiency gains through jointness. Air Vice Marshal (ret'd.) Arjun Subramaniam observes 'fierce turf battles' among the three services will be required before the creation of integrated theater commands and other joint commands to deal with other specialized capabilities such as cyber, space, and conventional missile forces.<sup>49</sup> Each new command or reform has implications for the resource-flows to specific services, who in turn have strong incentives to delay and resist reforms injurious to their interests. The consequence is Indian jointness remains more aspirational than realized.

*'Make in India.'* Indian civilians have long desired to build an indigenous defense industry as part of their broader vision for self-sufficiency. Such *swadeshi* (of one's own country) aspirations were closely tied up with the Indian independence movement. Modi has embraced these themes, but has updated their branding with his 'Make in India' campaign during his first term as prime minister and the parallel branding of *Atmanirbhar Bharat* ('Self-Reliant India') emphasized in his second term.

The prime minister's push for self-reliance has not gone unnoticed or unheeded by India's uniformed military services and government bureaucrats. In May 2020—one month before Galwan, but a few days after earlier, less violent clashes between Indian and Chinese forces in eastern Ladakh—Gen. Bipin Rawat gave an interview to complain about what he viewed as a tendency for the Indian military services to demand overly sophisticated systems that could only be acquired from abroad. This behavior was doubly expensive since it required the cash to make the expenditures but also the transfer of that money overseas where it would provide revenue to foreign firms instead of Indian ones. 'Arms imports, along with supply of spares and maintenance, have become increasingly cost prohibitive,' Rawat argued. Instead, he proposed, 'We should boost 'Make in India' by hand-holding our domestic industry even if they deliver weapons with only 70% of the [preferred military requirements] in the beginning... Given the opportunity, they will eventually deliver cutting-edge technology.'<sup>50</sup> Separately but relatedly, the defense acquisition procedures promulgated in September 2020 meaningfully sought to privilege domestic Indian industry in arms procurement decisions.<sup>51</sup>

There are tradeoffs with self-reliance. Ideally, India might be able to offer defense hardware more cheaply since its labor costs are lower than India's traditional defense suppliers. In practice, given the fact that many foreign suppliers operate with established physical capital footprints and/or with enormous economies of scale, Indian defense industry has disadvantages. This may manifest in terms of lower quality, a tradeoff that General Rawat argued in 2020 would dissipate over time. Also, at the outset though, the initial start-up costs of setting up indigenous industry that can compete globally may be quite expensive—even if the marginal cost in the future is competitive with international vendors. Amit Cowshish, who had extensive experience overseeing Indian defense acquisitions as a civilian official, wrote in 2021, 'Indian defence planners somehow fail to realise that creating industrial facilities domestically to manufacture these platforms and equipment needs

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<sup>49</sup> Air Vice Marshal (ret'd.) Arjun Subramaniam, 'Pushing Boundaries: Can the Indian Military Transform?' *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* (May-June 2023): 80.

<sup>50</sup> Rajat Pandit, 'Forces Must Shun Imports, Go for 'Make in India,' says Gen Bipin Rawat,' *Times of India*, May 10, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Press Information Bureau, 'Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh unveils Defence Acquisition Procedure – 2020,' September 28, 2020, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1659746>.

massive and sustained investment by the manufacturers and large budget outlays to buy the indigenously manufactured material.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, in the long-run building a world-class Indian defense industry might generate meaningful efficiency gains but that story may be different in the short-run when India might have to pay more for less capable equipment. This is part of the reason Pant observed in 2019, in a statement that resonates even more post-Galwan, 'India is now trying to chase competing goals of trying to achieve self-reliance as well as achieving effective immediate deterrence vis-à-vis its adversaries.'<sup>53</sup>

*Changing Uniform Military Recruitment and Retention Policies.* In June 2022, the Indian government announced a new *Agnipath* ('Path of Fire') program that would alter how the Indian military recruits and retains its enlisted personnel. The initiative marks a 'radical departure' from past practice, Laxman Behera and Vinay Kaushal observe.<sup>54</sup> The program seeks to attack the spiraling labor and pension costs that were crowding out other priorities from the defense budget. At the beginning of the Modi government, salaries and pensions accounted for about 50 percent of the defense budget. By 2022, they had swelled to 55 percent. This placed commensurate pressures on procurement and acquisition budgets. One special challenge was that successive policy changes in the 1960s and 1970s raised the minimum period for military service from 7 years up to 17 years. Since pension eligibility only required 15 years of service, nearly all service members who completed their minimum tenures became pensioners. The so-called *Agnipath* would no longer have new recruits serve long minimum periods, but instead require all new enlisted personnel first become *Agniveers* ('Fire Warriors') where they will have a 4-year term of service, after which 25 percent of their cadre would be eligible for permanent enlisted status. The 75 percent who did not receive permanent status would receive a large severance payment along with other benefits such as preferential hiring into state police or other government jobs. This will result in meaningful salary savings in the near-term but the long-term pension savings, while substantial, will not begin to accrue until the last cohorts of enlisted personnel recruited under the old scheme begin to retire in the mid-2040s.<sup>55</sup>

In a society where government jobs with good pensions are still desirable, the scheme attracted considerable protest when first announced. Yet larger concerns about efficacy could potentially undercut any efficiency gains from the program. Indian military veterans have expressed concerns that the four years is very short for training in modern warfare, especially in more technical branches. Additionally, given the implicit competition all *Agniveers* have with one another—in any cohort, no matter how talented and devoted, only 25 percent will be retained—there are concerns about the effect of the scheme on unit cohesion and morale. If such fears are born out, the Indian military might receive degraded operational effectiveness in exchange for future pension savings.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Amit Cowshish, 'India's 2021-22 Defence Budget Needs Honest Financial Reckoning, Not Empty Rhetoric,' *The Wire*, January 9, 2021, <https://thewire.in/security/india-defence-budget-military-spending-honest-recokoning>.

<sup>53</sup> Pant, 'We Need Not Whine...'

<sup>54</sup> Laxman Kumar Behara and Vinay Kaushal, 'The Case for Agnipath,' Observer Research Foundation *Issue Brief*, no. 567 (August 2022).

<sup>55</sup> Behara and Kaushal, 'The Case for Agnipath.'

<sup>56</sup> Ali Ahmed, 'Operational Risks and Societal Militarization: Agnipath's Entrenched Challenges,' *South Asian Voices*, July 13, 2022, <https://southasianvoices.org/operational-risks-and-societal-militarization-agnipaths-entrenched-challenges/>; Vinod Rai, 'Agnipath: The Scheme and Its Issues,' *ISAS Insights*, July 19, 2022, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/agnipath-the-scheme-and-its->

## External Balancing

This article has traced efforts at internal balancing in the prior three sections—those steps India could take within its borders to improve its security. Yet these internal balancing moves are not the only shifts India has made since Galwan. India has also pursued a spectrum of what realist scholars would call external balancing: improving diplomatic and defense ties with other countries that might assist India through the provision of defense technology and training in peacetime and possible concrete assistance during crisis and wartime.

Despite India's ostensibly non-aligned status during the Cold War, India has used external balancing in the past. In the 1960s India took assistance from both superpowers in the aftermath of its disastrous 1962 war with China. As relations between the Soviet Union and China worsened further in the 1960s and Washington opted to 'tilt' toward Pakistan in the Nixon administration, New Delhi in turn signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in 1971. This ushered in a deep defense trade relationship with Moscow that endures to present. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and India's own economic troubles at home, in the 1990s India re-equilibrated its relationship with Washington, including restarting naval exercises. It was not until the George W. Bush administration decided to set aside old nonproliferation baggage, however, that the relationship could develop a meaningful defense component.

The U.S.-India defense relationship has grown in subsequent decades, often ahead of other parts of the bilateral relationship. Beginning in the late 2000s, worsening Sino-U.S. and Sino-Indian ties shifted hypothetical common concerns about a rising China into immediate and tangible common concerns about a rising China. Former Indian national security advisor Shivshankar Menon has argued that China serves as the 'strategic glue' for the U.S.-India relationship, even as India has a multitude of other interests that benefit from a Washington positively inclined to assist India's own ascent in the international system.<sup>57</sup>

India retains concerns about provoking China through multilateral military cooperation, but those concerns have dissipated. Japanese participation in the annual Malabar naval exercises has been a continuous feature of that series since 2014 and continuous Australian participation began in 2020. Such multilateral exercises are related but separated formally from other diplomatic and security cooperation among the Quad grouping of the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia. Quad cooperation across all areas including defense has deepened even as the Quad partners continue to de-emphasize publicly the security elements of their partnership.<sup>58</sup>

India's already strong security ties with France have persisted even as India has cooperated with the Quad. Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam are also notable diplomatic and security partners for India, all motivated in part by their shared concerns over China. India announced its intent to sell BrahMos cruise missiles to the Philippines in 2022, showing (along with Russia, which co-owns the joint venture that makes the missile) a willingness to sell weapons to a state that is most likely to use those weapons against China.<sup>59</sup> India has maintained ties to Russia both because of its legacy

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[issues/](#); Rahul Bedi, 'Why Veterans, Defence Experts View Agnipath as 'Incompetent, Unworkable, and Inimical,' *The Wire*, June 28, 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Siddharth Varadarajan, 'More Than Geopolitics, There's Now Also an Economic Basis to Indo-US Ties,' *The Wire*, June 23, 2023.

<sup>58</sup> Dhruva Jaishankar and Tanvi Madan, 'The Quad Needs a Harder Edge: It's Time for the Group to Prioritize its Security Agenda,' *Foreign Affairs*, May 19, 2022.

<sup>59</sup> Mike Yeo, 'Philippines Signs Deal for BrahMos Supersonic Anti-Ship Missile,' *Defense News*, January 28, 2022.



dependence on Russian defense hardware but also in an attempt to prevent Russia from fully supporting China in a future Sino-Indian contingency where New Delhi will need continued access to Russian spares and munitions.<sup>60</sup> India has even been willing to enhance its ties with Taiwan publicly out of a desire to showcase it will not respect Beijing's sensitivities so long as the Sino-Indian relationship is abnormal.<sup>61</sup>

Yet even as India has grown less evasive in its balancing, India is still wary not to move too rapidly lest it invite Chinese aggression while the balance of power between the two Asian giants is so sizeable. Adm. (ret'd.) Karambir Singh, Indian Navy Chief from 2019 to 2021, recently argued, '[O]ne of the misunderstandings that exists in the West is that India is going a little slower, is tentative in its actions. And I think here the West, to my mind, must understand India's position, the economic linkages [with China], its comprehensive national power deficit with China, and the fact that it shares a disputed border with China. So [India has] to take a more nuanced stand in managing the China dynamic.'<sup>62</sup> To the extent that limited external balancing is required to fill gaps created by inadequate Indian internal balancing, then, there may be limits that New Delhi self-imposes on how far and how fast it is willing to go in external partnership.

## Conclusion

How to assess this multidimensional picture of India's China policy in the Modi years, both before and after Galwan? India's post-Galwan behavior strongly indicates that Indian decisionmakers concluded they had been underbalancing China before 2020 and sought to correct the balance. The harder assessment is whether India continues to underbalance today. This involves very difficult calculations. Is New Delhi correct that the internal security threat can be managed absent a major re-infusion of Army manpower? Can the Pakistan front be contained with fewer troops? Reasonable people can disagree on the bets that New Delhi has made. Yet they are bets. In order to improve the balance against China, India took steps that entailed greater risks toward other dangers. Similarly, India has also sought to strengthen its defense partnerships with the U.S., Japan, Australia, and others. The changing threat has caused even a hesitant India to deepen defense ties to a degree that skeptics would have doubted a decade ago. Here, too, there remain risks that New Delhi's informal security understandings will be inadequate in the event of serious crisis or war with China.<sup>63</sup>

The delicate balancing of risks—which appear to involve underbalancing against some of them—may help make sense of India and China's gradual disengagement along the border since 2020. These agreements have returned Indian access to several locations seized by China in the spring and summer of 2020, but at the apparent cost of some meaningful Indian concessions. In some areas, there are new buffer zones that deny access to areas where India previously could patrol that now neither India nor China can reach. There is reporting that China has been given patrolling rights to areas such as Yangtze in Arunachal Pradesh that it accessed rarely prior to 2020.<sup>64</sup> Much of

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<sup>60</sup> Raj Verma, 'India's Quest for Security and its Neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine War,' *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs* 112/1 (2023): 14-26.

<sup>61</sup> Sutirtho Patranobis, 'China warns India on security ties with Taiwan after ex-chiefs visit island,' *Hindustan Times*, September 1, 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Ladwig, et al., 'India-China security competition...'

<sup>63</sup> Rajagopalan, 'Realism and Indian Foreign Policy,' 31-32.

<sup>64</sup> Ajay Banerjee, 'Chinese seek 'unreasonable' patrolling rights at two LAC spots along Arunachal Pradesh,' *The Tribune*, September 28, 2024; Dinakar Peri and Vijaita Singh, 'India, China Undertake "Coordinated Patrolling",' *The Hindu*, October 25, 2024.

the analysis has framed the deal in terms of Chinese concerns about Sino-U.S. relations and Indian needs for Chinese investments, but the dyadic Sino-Indian balance may also help explain why an imperfect deal was desirable for Indian leaders triaging multiple internal and external dangers.<sup>65</sup>

If this probable diagnosis of Indian underbalancing is correct, it raises additional questions for future research. Why would Indian decisionmakers take such risks? Does it have to do with the incentives Indian politicians face?<sup>66</sup> Does India have compensatory advantages along other dimensions of latent power that might be missed in a nearer-term net assessment?<sup>67</sup> Finally, how might India act now to minimize these risks? Collectively, examining these questions will help enhance our understanding of Indian statecraft and also the causes and consequences of India's grand strategic choices as well.

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<sup>65</sup> Kanti Bajpai, 'Why Have China and India Suddenly Come Together?' *Foreign Policy*, November 20, 2024.

<sup>66</sup> Vipin Narang and Paul Staniland, 'Democratic Accountability and Foreign Security Policy: Theory and Evidence from India,' *Security Studies* 27/1(2018): 410–47.

<sup>67</sup> For an earlier attempt at this, which largely found India falling behind, see Charles Wolf, Jr., et al., *China and India, 2025: A Comparative Assessment* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2011).

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