

# China-India Brief

*A publication of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation*



*Guest Column*

## China, India and the ‘Geopolitics Trap’?

By David Scott

On October 25, 2022, Sun Weidong’s [farewell speech](#), was posted on the Chinese embassy website, looking over his time as China’s ambassador to India, from July 2019 to November 2022. Sun had been China’s ambassador to Pakistan from 2013 to 2017, which ended with the Doklam stand-off between India and China on India’s eastern Himalayan sector in summer 2017.

China-India relations significantly deteriorated during Sun’s tenure as ambassador to India. This reflected ongoing structural and immediate issues between the two neighbours. The Mamallapuram Summit in October 2019 already showed that the “Wuhan Spirit”

 Lee Kuan Yew  
School of Public Policy

 CENTRE ON ASIA  
AND GLOBALISATION

The *China-India Brief* is a bi-monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia’s two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

Centre on Asia and Globalisation

sppcwb@nus.edu.sg

469A Bukit Timah Road, Tower Block 10,

Singapore 259770

<https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/cag>

*cont'd p2*

trumpeted at the first informal summit held between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in April 2018 was **“dissipating”**. Personal leadership diplomacy slumped. By the end of Sun’s posting, the “non-meeting” between Modi and Xi at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in September 2022 was seen by Jabin Jacob as a **“necessary corrective”** to these informal summits of 2018 and 2019, which he considered had been a “Chinese success in misleading the Indians”. Admittedly at the G20 Summit in November 2022, Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi spoke to each other for the first time in public since the 2020 fighting and deaths at Galwan. However, this meeting was just an exchange of after dinner courtesies, rather than any arranged substantive meeting, unlike the G20 Xi-Biden meeting. Such minimal China-India interaction, **“cold-shouldering”** in effect, illustrated further deterioration in China-India relations since 2019.

Sun’s ambassador period was dominated by the confrontations of summer 2020 at Depsang, Galwan, Gogra-Hot Springs, Pangong Lake, and Demchok; along the un-agreed and un-mapped Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the western Himalayan sector between Ladakh and Aksai Chin. Aksai Chin was controlled by China but claimed by India. Cross-LAC incursions were already rising during the 2010s but the confrontation that occurred in summer 2020 was **“unprecedented”** for its duration, casualties, and military build-up. The

subsequent de-escalation process was long, drawn out and incomplete during Sun’s tenure. Troop withdrawal was completed for Patrol Point (PP) 14 (around Galwan) by July 2020, for Pangong Lake by February 2021, for PP-17A by August 2021 and PP-15 by September 2022. Yet, Indian distrust of China has only become more evident following the withdrawals. Indian critics noted in September that these mutual disengagement lines were actually within Indian-claimed LAC lines. Referred to variously as **“China’s buffer zone bait”** and the **“dragon’s design”**, the new disengagement lines were seen as being geopolitically advantageous for China, rather than restoring the pre-April 2020 disposition lines. Meanwhile, disengagement from Depsang and Demchok remains un-agreed as of the end of 2022. Galwan was the most violent confrontation between Indian and Chinese security forces in decades, involving casualties on both sides. Sun’s **response** at the time had been to assert that “the incident was completely instigated by the Indian side”, that “the responsibility does not lie with the Chinese side” and that “Galwan Valley is located on the Chinese side of the LAC”. India vehemently rejected each of these assertions.

Sun’s farewell speech emphasised earlier cultural and historical links between India and China, though their respective use of Buddhist diplomacy shows rising soft power rivalry. His **invocation** that “China-India interactions dated back to over 2,000 years

ago, and friendly cooperation has covered most of the time” is true enough chronologically but ignores the fact that historically the two states have not interacted that much. However, the modern rise of the Indo-Pacific leaves a strategic area, or rather arena, where India and China are now bumping up against each other in a way that earlier history avoided.

Sun argued in his [farewell speech](#) that “there is enough room in the world for China and India to develop together”. There is, though, a China-India problem with *room* (i.e., their respective strategic space). A multi-level analysis (celestial-global-regional-border) is helpful. At the celestial level, there is an emerging outer space race, be it the Moon or be it Mars, between China and India. At the global level (for example, environmental positions) there is some, though diminishing, space for India and China to cooperate. However, as soon as one gets into tangible regional and immediate border levels, there looks like not enough room. China and India are constantly and increasingly bumping up against each other in the (a) wider Indo-Pacific and Eurasia; (b) South Asia/South China Sea in their respective immediate neighborhoods, and perhaps crucially, their (c) shared but disputed frontier along the Himalayas. In this vein, India’s External Affairs Minister Subramaniam Jaishankar [warned](#) in August 2022 that “the state of the border will determine the state of the relationship” between China and India.

Sun’s farewell speech included assertions about the role of geopolitics in the China-India relationship. A starting point is Sun’s innocuous enough [words](#) to his Indian audience that “we should break out of the ‘geopolitics trap’ and find a new path that is different from the past”. The trap for him lay in Western ideas. Sun went on:

If the Western theory of geopolitics is applied to China-India relationship, then major neighboring countries like us will inevitably view each other as threats and rivals. Consequently, competition and confrontation will be the main mode of interaction and zero-sum game will be the inevitable result.

Sun’s categorisation of geopolitics as a Western theory is questionable. While many modern geopolitical thinkers (for example Mackinder, Mahan, Haushoffer, and Spykman) came from the West, geopolitics’ focus on the effects of geography (a state’s *location*) on international politics is not inherently or particularly Western. Kautilya’s *mandala* system shows ancient Indian geopolitics; a “potent non-Western theoretical and conceptual reservoir...the DNA of strategic culture” ([Arshid Dal](#)) and specifically applied by [Kamal and Sahni](#) to Indian relations with Pakistan and China.

It can also be argued that China follows geopolitical imperatives in seeking spatial advantaging through control of Taiwan and

the South China Sea, incorporating Tibet (neighboring India) and the Aksai Chin plateau (also claimed by India), positioning forces near the Shiliguri Corridor (potentially threatening Indian access to Northeast India), claiming Arunachal Pradesh (potentially threatening the Brahmaputra basin), and allying with Pakistan (on India's flanks). Geopolitical considerations were involved in Chinese overlook and perhaps "geopolitical intent" over Indian control of the Galwan Valley lower road.

Sun's farewell speech included his assertion that if "geopolitics is applied to China-India relationship, then major neighboring countries like us will inevitably view each other as threats and rivals". This is debatable at two levels. First, any inevitability in China-India relations is questionable. Second, a better "threat" model seems not geopolitics in itself, but rather the *balance of threat* model proposed by Stephen Walt. This involves factors including a state's aggregate strength, military/offensive power, geographic proximity, and (perceived) offensive intentions. Applying aggregate strength and military/offensive power factors would make India and China balance with each other against the US, the logic of Kenneth Waltz's *balance of power* (structural realism) argument. Instead, India's perceivable tilt against China reflects Walt's further balance of threat criteria of geographic proximity and perceived offensive intentions. Here,

US and Indian policies towards China are indeed "converging" in which Beijing increasingly represents their main national threats.

Concerning *geographic proximity*, China's presence along the Himalayas overlooking Northern India is disadvantageous for India (which is where geopolitics enters the picture), heightened by involving disputed territory (Aksai China and Arunachal Pradesh) and borders. More widely, China's geographical proximity to the east (Myanmar), south (Indian Ocean) and west (Pakistan) has generated an uncomfortable widespread feeling in India of strategic "encirclement" by China; against which, India increasingly seeks countervailing strategic partners like Vietnam, Japan and above all the US.

Concerning *perceived offensive intentions*, Sun's farewell speech used all the traditional public diplomacy rhetoric of China; such as "peace", "common development", "win-win cooperation", "friendship", "living in harmony with our neighbors", "mutual fairness" and "non-interference". However, India increasingly distrusts such Chinese phrases, the so-called "trust deficit" being heightened for India in recent years by growing suspicion over the motives behind China's Maritime Silk Road initiative across the Indian Ocean and more immediately by border events. In the immediate aftermath of Galwan, in India, Manjul's *First Cut* cartoon from June 2020 summed this up as

Xi Jinping reiterating “I want peace” with a second bubble reading “a piece of your country”. The **“strained”** visit of China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi to India in July 2022 and his soothing rhetoric, attracted **local comments** in *India Today* of the “Chinese art of deception”.

Trust issues were on show with the *Yudh Abhyas* military exercises held in Uttarakhand between India and the US during November-December 2022, near to the Line of Actual Control (LOC) between India and China. China’s Foreign Ministry **responded** that the exercise “does not help build bilateral trust” and that it “violated” confidence building measures signed between India and China in the 1990s. The counter-rebuttal is India already does not trust China, and that the 1990s confidence building measures have already failed to address the growing friction and confrontations since 2017 between China and India, most evident at Doklam and then at Galwan. In the official Chinese state media, Fei Xue **said** the *Yudh Abhyas* exercising would “embolden India to provoke China in a more aggressive manner”, and that “India hopes to take advantage of extraterritorial forces as leverage in resolving the China-India border dispute”. However, the Indian position would be that the border dispute shows a continuing China threat to India, which India needs to counterbalance through compensatory build up of its own military forces (*internal balancing*) and

strengthened security cooperation with other China-concerned powers like the US (*external balancing*).

Border issues remain central. Jaishankar **warned** on August 12, 2022, that “if China disturbs the peace and tranquility in border areas, it will impact our relations. Our relationship is not normal, it cannot be normal as the border situation is not normal”. In contrast, three days later on August, 15, Sun was talking of the border being **“overall stable”**, which was specifically, and vehemently rejected by Major General, albeit retired, Harsha Kakar as a **“quantum of false truths”**. In a more delicate way, Sun’s farewell call to Jaishankar on October 26, saw Sun push the image of normality but Jaishankar pushing back on the **importance of resolving border dispute**.

On December 9, 2022, a **“new flashpoint”** re-opened near Tawang along the equally un-agreed and un-mapped LAC in the eastern Himalayan sector between Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh, the latter being controlled by India but claimed by China. This involved confrontation and injuries as India rebuffed some 300 to 500 Chinese soldiers attempting to secure a mountain peak and gain geopolitical advantage from the heights.

Geopolitics is not necessarily a “trap” for China and India, but it is shaping their actions and reactions towards each other. At the end of the year, Sushant Singh **argued** that “China has India trapped on their disputed border” on account on Beijing’s military and infrastructure advantage. China-India relations start 2023 from this ongoing border and regional geopolitical confrontation.

**David Scott writes regularly on India and China foreign policy including India-China relations, is a Member of the Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC), and is also Associate Member of the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies. He can be contacted at [davidscott366@outlook.com](mailto:davidscott366@outlook.com)**