



# CHINA | TRENDS

BY INSTITUT MONTAIGNE

## MILITARY OPTIONS FOR XI'S STRATEGIC AMBITIONS

FEBRUARY 2021



### INTRODUCTION

MATHIEU DUCHÂTEL

"Xi Jinping's thought on a powerful military" (习近平强军思想) is an entry of its own on Baidu encyclopedia, and a category in the Chinese press and in specialized publications. Xi's thought is often described as a "series of guiding principles for building a new type of people's army that dares to fight wars and that wins wars" (建设"敢打仗,打胜仗"的新型人民军队).<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, readiness for war has become a leitmotiv in Xi Jinping's speeches to the military. Last October, visiting a Marines unit in Chaozhou in Fujian province, Xi Jinping called the Marines corps to "put all their mind and energy in preparing for war" (要把全部心思和精力放在备战打仗上).<sup>2</sup> The slogan "dares to fight wars and win wars" can be seen painted or engraved on many walls in military sites in China. In the first 2021 order issued by the Central Military Commission in early January, and signed by Xi Jinping, the People's Liberation Army is asked to "resolutely implement the policy directions of the Party Centre and the Central Military Commission, and carry forward a fighting spirit without fearing hardship or fearing death" (坚决贯彻党中央和中央军委决策指示,发扬一不怕苦、二不怕死战斗精神).<sup>3</sup>

These are more than just words. **The Chinese Communist Party is investing enormous amounts of budget and political capital to build a "world-class military" by 2050** – a goal outlined by Xi Jinping in his work report to the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2017, and a testimony of its ambitions for China on the world stage.

Military power is about daring to fight wars and win on the ground, but it is first and foremost a tool of foreign policy. Greater capabilities provide the Chinese leadership with options to secure favorable outcomes during crises, in line with Chinese national interests. This raises one question for the short term future. How likely is China to use more coercion in territorial disputes? **China's pattern of behavior under Xi Jinping in the**

*Greater capabilities provide the Chinese leadership with options to secure favorable outcomes during crises, in line with Chinese national interests.*

1. Gong Fangbin & Hou Anyu, "Analysis of Xi Jinping's thought on a powerful military (习近平强军思想论析)", *Qianxian*, 13 August 2018, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0813/c40531-30226050.html>.

2. "Xi Jinping stressed during his visit to the Marine Corps to speed up the transformation and the enhancement of combat capabilities, and strive to forge a versatile and fast-response elite brigade operational in all-domain (习近平在视察海军陆战队时强调 加快推进转型建设 加快提升作战能力 努力锻造一支合成多能快速反应全域运用的精兵劲旅)", *Xinhua*, 13 October 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-10/13/c\\_1126601561.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-10/13/c_1126601561.htm).

3. "Xi Jinping signed the Central Military Commission's Order No. 1 of 2021, ordering to the whole army to start training (习近平签署中央军委2021年1号命令 向全军发布开训动员令)", *Xinhua*, 04 January 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-01/04/c\\_1126944155.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-01/04/c_1126944155.htm).

**South and East China Seas, in the Taiwan Strait and at the border with India provides ample evidence that coercion, fait accompli and the display of power to alter the status quo are an entire part of China's regional playbook.**

This issue of China Trends sheds light on the links between military power and Chinese behavior in its region, with the spotlight on the Taiwan Strait, the border clashes with India in the Himalayas, and the status of defense cooperation with Russia.

The constant intrusions of the PLA Air Force inside Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone, although not a violation of international law, are upsetting the status quo with Taiwanese forces. They suggest an intention to gradually expand China's control over the air and maritime space Southwest of Taiwan, close to the Bashi channel – a key area for submarine and anti-submarine operations. Is this a prelude to a full-scale invasion of Taiwan? Sheu Jyh-hsiang, from Taiwan's Institute for National Defense and Security Research, takes an in-depth look at China's amphibious capabilities by looking at the ongoing change of scale of the Marine Corps of the PLA Navy - from two to eight brigades. He argues that **the geography and urban density of Taiwan Island are making amphibious landing an extremely risky endeavor, and hence a focus on helicopter airborne assault is to be expected in the development of the Chinese Marine Corps.** The build-up of the Chinese Marines is still a work in progress, and it is likely to take a few more years. This will also provide the Chinese leadership with new options to protect Chinese overseas interests, in regions other than East Asia.

The China-India piece of this issue dives into the Chinese understanding of the border clashes that erupted last Spring in the Ladakh area. The articles translated display strong similarities – especially in the aspects of the conflict they do not cover. At no point do they explore the operational details of the clashes with India from the perspective of the Chinese military, or the status of forces along the Line of Actual Control. **The operations of the PLA in the Himalayas are clearly a topic off limits – and in that China gives Indian media and experts carte blanche to be the main source of factual information for the international community.** The sources clearly describe the clashes with India as a “contest of will power”, and resolutely adopt a grand strategic perspective. This is about the balance of power, and China has to demonstrate its resolve and its capacities to India and the United States. Chinese experts agree that there is a price to pay, especially on the economic front where Chinese actions have set in motion an ambitious Indian program to reduce China's economic footprint in India. But while it used to be a mainstream view in the Chinese strategic community that Chinese foreign policy should avoid creating an anti-China international coalition, this view no longer seems dominant. On the contrary, despite nuances among analysts, the general impression is that China can afford serious and long-term damage on its relations with India.

Russia remains the main foreign source of technology and know-how for China's military modernization, but its relative importance is decreasing given the spectacular progress of China's own arms industry. **Observers across the world wonder if China-Russia defense cooperation can withstand the test of China becoming a more serious competitor for Russia on export markets.** If one adds to this equation the Russian commitment to Indian defense modernization, the question that arises is whether the China-Russia military partnership could lose steam. The response of Chinese experts, as shown by Viviana Zhu in her analysis of some of their recent writings, is categorically negative – the strategic driver is so strong that potential frictions in the area of technology transfers and the elements of competition in China-Russia military balance will not derail the partnership.

## ABOUT

China Trends seeks understanding of China from Chinese language sources. In an era where the international news cycle is often about China, having a reality check on Chinese expressions often provides for more in-depth analysis of the logic at work in policies, and needed information about policy debates where they exist. China Trends is a quarterly publication by Institut Montaigne's Asia program, with each issue focusing on a single theme.



## AMPHIBIOUS CAPACITIES: THE TAIWAN STRAIT SCENARIOS

During his inspection at the headquarters of the People's Liberation Army Navy Marine Corps (PLANMC 中国人民解放军海军陆战队) on October 13, 2020, Xi Jinping discussed the role of the PLANMC: "... (*The People's Liberation Army Navy Marine Corps*) shoulders the important duties of safeguarding the country's sovereignty security, territorial integrity, maritime interests, and overseas interests".<sup>4</sup> As evident in the expansion of PLA Navy fleets, China has invested heavily in its amphibious capabilities under Xi Jinping's military reform of the PLA. Although Taiwan is likely included in Xi Jinping's reference to "territorial integrity (领土完整)", **the main amphibious force in a Taiwan invasion scenario would not come from the Navy, but from the amphibious brigades of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)**. This piece shows that in the development of China's amphibious units, more emphasis is being given to air assault capabilities than amphibious landing vehicles. A strong focus on the development of helicopter-borne capabilities is thus to be expected in the future development of the PLA's amphibious units.

### 1. The PLA: A Rising Amphibious Power

Historically, the PLA has had two different types of amphibious land units: the PLANMC and the amphibious units of the PLAGF (e.g., Amphibious Mechanized Division). The People's Liberation Army Ground Forces (PLAGF 中国人民解放军陆军) has been responsible for large-scale amphibious assault missions, with a view to invade Taiwan since the 1950s. Before the reorganization of Chinese amphibious forces, the PLAGF had four amphibious mechanized divisions with a total strength of 52,000 to 60,000 soldiers; two were established between 2007 and 2012.<sup>5</sup> During Xi's military reforms, the PLAGF amphibious mechanized divisions have been reorganized into combined arms brigades and the PLANMC has been expanded.

To conduct operations in the South China Sea, the PLANMC was re-established in 1979 and kept a format of two brigades until 2017. For a long time, the PLANMC functioned as special forces. In addition to island or base defense, the PLANMC was to carry out amphibious operations to enable the large-scale landing of the PLAGF. **Although both PLAGF amphibious divisions/brigades and the PLANMC**

*It has been imperative for the PLANMC to expand and to pursue the strategy of the "sea-to-land (由海向陆)".*

**can carry out amphibious assaults, the PLAGF has heavier equipment and firepower to continue advancing towards the rear of a defender, following the establishment of the beachhead.** The PLANMC is a relatively lighter, more flexible unit suitable for operations across a

wider range of territories. However, its operational area is limited to the beachhead and the intensity of the assault it can carry is smaller.<sup>6</sup> Hence, Huang Yu-wen of Tamkang University's Graduate Institute of International



JYH-SHYANG  
SHEU

Dr. Jyh-Shyang Sheu is currently an Assistant Research Fellow at the "Division of Chinese Politics, Military and Warfighting Concepts", Institute for National Defense and Security Research. He obtained his PhD from the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Germany. Dr. Sheu's research interests encompass global advanced weapon systems and its implication for strategy; asymmetric warfare; developments of global warfighting concept, and Chinese Military.

4. "Xi inspects Marine Corps, urges building elite troop", *Xinhua*, 13 October 2020, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202010/13/WS5f858f3ea31024d0ba7e6fd.html>.

5. Lin Tsung-han, "The impact of the development of amphibious warfare by the Chinese Communist Party (中共兩棲(三)作戰發展對我之影響)", *Navy Professional Journal*, Vol.50, No.2 (April 1, 2016), p.31.

6. Huang Yu-wen, "The Construction and Development of the Marine Corps after the Chinese Communist Party's Military Reform (中共軍改後海軍陸戰隊的建構與發展)", *Navy Professional Journal*, Vol.53, No.5 (October 1, 2019), p.62.

Affairs and Strategic Studies, explains that it has been imperative for the PLANMC to expand and to pursue the strategy of the “sea-to-land (由海向陆)”.

### With China’s rise as a maritime power in recent years, as well as Xi’s military reforms, at least four PLAGF units have been transferred to the PLANMC.<sup>7</sup>

As noted by Ou Si-fu, Research Fellow at the Institute for National Defense and Security Research of Taiwan, this indicates China’s focus on power projection and the development of its naval forces. In early 2017, several army units, including the 77<sup>th</sup> motorized infantry brigade, were transferred to the PLANMC,<sup>8</sup> representing the first step of the PLANMC expansion under Xi’s military reforms. In April 2017, Major General Kong Jun was transferred from the PLAGF armor troops and appointed as the first commander of the PLANMC.<sup>9</sup>

### Current strength of Chinese amphibious land units

After Xi launched a new wave of military reforms, the PLANMC expanded rapidly. This development of its amphibious units prompted China to claim that it already has the basic capabilities to “crush the attempts of Taiwan independence (粉碎“台独”分裂图谋)”.<sup>10</sup> Wang Zaixi, the former deputy director of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, has also stressed on several occasions China’s “readiness to solve the Taiwan issue due to the strength it has developed”. However, according to the assessments of the United States Department of Defense (USDOD), the PLANMC has an enlarged force structure of eight brigades in total: six marine brigades, a special forces brigade, and an aviation brigade equipped with helicopters. Among the six marine brigades, four are newly formed and have yet to reach full mission capability.

*This development of its amphibious units prompted China to claim that it already has the basic capabilities to “crush the attempts of Taiwan independence (粉碎“台独”分裂图谋)”*

Even though Xi’s reform largely focused on expanding the PLANMC and downsizing the PLAGF, which by 2017 accounted for less than 50 percent of the PLA,<sup>11</sup> it seems that the PLA intends to retain both types of amphibious units. The PLAGF has maintained its amphibious capabilities, since units transferred from the PLAGF to the PLANMC are not amphibious but normal land units, such as mechanized brigades or even coastal defense units.<sup>12</sup> Currently both the PLAGF and the PLANMC have six amphibious brigades and there is no sign of integration of the PLAGF amphibious units and the PLANMC. **The PLAGF amphibious units are still considered the main force for the amphibious invasion of Taiwan due to its heavier equipment, greater firepower, and its capabilities for deep battle.**

In addition to the marine brigades, the PLANMC is establishing an aviation brigade equipped with helicopters, mostly Z-18 and Z-20 utility helicopters. **With its own aviation unit, the PLANMC will acquire the capacity to conduct vertical assaults independently, in addition to traditional amphibious assaults** (e.g., with landing crafts, LSTs, LCACs, and amphibious armored vehicles). Moreover, the PLANMC is also establishing an air assault battalion within its marine brigade equipped with helicopters.<sup>13</sup> With the combination of vertical and surface assaults, the PLANMC could even launch its own over-the-horizon amphibious operations.

7. Ou Si-fu, “Chapter 6: Formation and Deployment of the PLA Navy (第六章: 解放军海軍的編成與部署)”, in Hung Tzu-Chieh & Lee Kuan-Chen (ed.), Annual Assessment of PRC’s Political and Military Developments (2020中共政軍發展評估報告), Institute for National Defense and Security Research, December 2020, p.111, <https://indsr.org.tw/Download/2020中共年報上綱版.pdf>.

8. “PLA marine corps expanded by 7 brigades of 100,000 soldiers, the transformation of the ground arm (解放军海军陆战队扩编7旅10万兵 陆军王牌转型)”, *Ta Kung Pao*, 20 March 2017, <http://news.takungpao.com/mainland/focus/2017-03/3432285.html>.

9. Yue Huairang & Jiang Ziwen, “New leadership of the Marine Corps revealed: Kong Jun and Yuan Huazhi respectively appointed commander and political commissar (海军陆战队新领导层亮相: 孔军、袁华智分任司令员、政委)”, *The Paper*, 27 May 2017, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_1695787](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1695787).

10. Wang Zaixi, “Forceful Reunification of Taiwan? The latest judgment of the former deputy director of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council (会不会武统台湾? 国台办原副主任最新判断!)”, *Journal of the CPPCC*, 7 November 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/c426uplcW0Zi4W0qsCMVqQ>.

11. “Facts and Figures on China’s military reform”, *Xinhuanet*, December 19, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/19/c\\_136837189.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/19/c_136837189.htm).

12. Huang Yu-wen, “The Construction and Development of the Marine Corps after the Chinese Communist Party’s Military Reform (中共軍改後海軍陸戰隊的建構與發展)”, *Navy Professional Journal*, Vol.53, No.5 (October 1, 2019), p.66.

13. “China’s 075 « dual-attack « aircraft carrier unit revealed, the « air assault battalion « of the Marine Corps reappeared (中国075“两攻”舰载机部队曝光, 海军陆战队“空突营”再现身!)”, *QQ.com*, 21 April 2020, <https://new.qq.com/omn/20200421/20200421A0CL3200.html>.

For amphibious assault operations, the PLA has developed a series of corresponding equipment, such as the Type-05 (ZBD-05) Amphibious Infantry Fighting Vehicle and its assault guns (ZTD-05), the Self-propelled Howitzer (PLZ-07B), and the ZTL-11 8x8 wheeled assault gun. With Type 726 (Yuyi-Class) LCACs, the Chinese amphibious units could launch mechanized landing operations with the newly-equipped amphibious assault ships, such as the 071 landing platform/dock (LPD) and the 075 landing helicopter dock (LHD).

## 2. More Aviation, Less Amphibian?

### PLAN amphibious fleet enhances aviation capability

The navy is arguably the most important focus of the PLA development.

**With approximately 350 platforms,<sup>14</sup> the PLA Navy (PLAN) has become the world's largest naval force.** In the

*This indicates that the PLAN is developing expeditionary fleets capable of regional and global missions aiming to defend China's overseas interests rather than focus on the large number of LSTs and medium landing crafts required for a large-scale beach assault.*

last decade, the amphibious fleet of the PLAN has obtained several large platforms, such as the Type 071 Class (Yuzhao-class) LPD and Type 075 Class (Yushen-class) LHD. This indicates that the PLAN is developing expeditionary fleets capable of regional and global missions aiming to defend China's overseas interests rather than focus on the large number of LSTs and medium landing crafts required for a large-scale beach assault.<sup>15</sup>

These large amphibious naval platforms also indicate the PLAN's increasing focus on helicopter

capabilities, that grant greater flexibility to conduct different types of missions, such as Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response (HA/DR), power projection in disputed areas (e.g., the South China Sea), and long-distance operations. With the use of helicopters, these ships also offer enhanced vertical assault capabilities. Especially the Type 075 Yushen-class LHD, which has a full-length flight deck and larger hanger. The first Type 075 LHD conducted sea trials in 2020, and it was photographed in the South China Sea as recently as November 2020. The second Type 075 LHD has been launched, and the third one is under construction. The design of the Type 075 LHD emphasizes aviation uses, specifically helicopters.<sup>16</sup>

However, though the development of both the Chinese amphibious fleet and the PLANMC seems to be focused on long-distance power projection, **this development plan could be influenced by specific geographical constraints posed by the Taiwan Strait's operating conditions.**

### Aviation capability is an important factor for an invasion of Taiwan

Building an expeditionary naval force with large platforms, such as LHDs and LPDs, is consistent with current Chinese national and military strategies, for example, the South China Sea policy, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the creation of overseas bases. Heliborne capabilities also play a crucial role in missions of projection in the South China Sea or an invasion of Taiwan.

But the Taiwan Strait poses significant challenges for amphibious operations since this type of assault is also limited by the weather. In winter, the

14. "2020 Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," U.S. Department of Defense, 1 September 2020, p.44, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

15. "2020 Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," U.S. Department of Defense, 1 September 2020, p.117, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

16. Shu Hsiao-Huang, "China's 075-class amphibious assault ship strengthens PLA's ability to fight at sea (中共075級兩棲突擊艦強化解放軍渡海作戰能力)", *Institute for National Defense and Security Research*, December 15, 2020, [https://indsr.org.tw/tw/News\\_detail/3280/%E4%B8%AD%E5%85%B1075%E7%B4%9A%E5%85%A9%E6%A3%B2%E7%AA%81%E6%93%8A%E8%89%A6%E5%BC%B7%E5%8C%96%E8%A7%A3%E6%94%BE%E8%BB%8D%E6%B8%A1%E6%B5%B7%E4%B-D%9C%E6%88%B0%E8%83%BD%E5%8A%9B](https://indsr.org.tw/tw/News_detail/3280/%E4%B8%AD%E5%85%B1075%E7%B4%9A%E5%85%A9%E6%A3%B2%E7%AA%81%E6%93%8A%E8%89%A6%E5%BC%B7%E5%8C%96%E8%A7%A3%E6%94%BE%E8%BB%8D%E6%B8%A1%E6%B5%B7%E4%B-D%9C%E6%88%B0%E8%83%BD%E5%8A%9B).

northeast monsoon brings several months of rough sea conditions and strong winds; summer is typhoon season; and the dense fog is common during seasonal changes. These weather phenomena negatively affect any kind of maritime operation. In addition, **following rapid economic development, urbanization, and heavy investment in infrastructure, Taiwan's western coastline has become unsuitable for large-scale conventional amphibious landing operations.** Therefore, a potential invasion of Taiwan would require extra capabilities in both land and aviation forces.

### 3. Possible scenario of amphibious assault on Taiwan

A pattern, that is worth noting in the context of relations between China and Taiwan, is emerging from these developments.

First, the physical features of western Taiwan limit the potential area of operations for Chinese amphibious land units. In this situation, an over-the-horizon assault with heliborne land units is necessary for a successful landing mission. Therefore, **China's focus on large amphibious assault ships, such as Type 071 Class LPD and Type 075 Class LHD, not only enables China to further conduct missions of protection of overseas interests and power projection, but also to potentially mount a large-scale amphibious assault on Taiwan.** As a result, the aviation units of the PLANMC may play a more important role than in the marine corps units of other countries, more focused on amphibious landing.

*The aviation units of the PLANMC may play a more important role than in the marine corps units of other countries, more focused on amphibious landing.*

Second, compared to the larger/heavier amphibious combined brigades of the PLAGF, the PLANMC brigades are better prepared to adapt to a range of combat environments. With its expedition-capable amphibious fleet, the PLANMC offers commanders the flexibility to launch assaults even from the eastern part of Taiwan. While it could never replace the main amphibious force of the army's combined brigades, the flexibility of the PLANMC represents a huge strategic advantage, which would be best exploited by amphibious and heliborne assaults on harbors and airports to support the follow-up echelons. **The increasing air assault capabilities also grant commanders the flexibility to launch operations without needing to consider the limitations of coastal terrain.**<sup>17</sup> This flexibility not only could be used in a full-scale invasion of Taiwan, but also in the offshore islands of Taiwan or even in other disputed areas, such as the South China Sea.

Overall, China's amphibious units have largely expanded in recent years, with a focus on both mechanization and aviation capacities. However, China's current expansion of the PLANMC through the transfer of units and personnel from the PLAGF, including the transfer of commanders, is a reminder that **the PLANMC's capabilities are still under construction and have yet to reach maturity.**

17. Shi Yang, "What the 075 Amphibious Assault Ship Means for the Chinese Army (075两栖攻击舰对中国军队意味着什么)", <http://guancha.cn>, 9 August 2020, <https://war.163.com/20/0809/12/FJJD3F50000181KT.html>.



## THE BORDER CLASHES WITH INDIA: IN THE SHADOW OF THE US

The clashes that erupted on the China-India border in the Himalayas in early May 2020 have morphed into a state of permanent tension along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). A peak of violence was reached during an incident on June 15 on the shores of the Pangong Tso Lake, which took the lives of 20 Indian and an unspecified number of Chinese troops. Until now, there are still regular reports of tense and dangerous close encounters between the two militaries.

Chinese experts did not start publishing analyses and commentaries on the confrontation and its consequences on China-India relations until late in the summer of 2020. **The absence of hot takes in Chinese media and of quick think-tank analyses suggests a cautious effort to coordinate the narrative of the conflict.** And even after this three-month hiatus, some specific angles of the conflict appear to be off-limits. No one directly addresses the possibility that China might have had an interest to start the clashes at several points of the disputed border, which is the mainstream view outside of China. No analyst links military operations on the ground to China's foreign policy and strategic goals with India. As usual, **Chinese analysts are obviously not free to share factual details.** Anecdotes and granular stories are absent from their analysis, in stark contrast with the continuous flow of information, sometimes contradictory, carried in the Indian press.

*No one directly addresses the possibility that China might have had an interest to start the clashes at several points of the disputed border, which is the mainstream view outside of China.*

This piece builds on the analyses published by some of China's most influential experts of India and South Asian affairs: Liu Zongyi<sup>18</sup>, secretary-general of the Center for China and South Asian Studies of the Shanghai Institutes of International Studies (SIIS); Lin Minwang<sup>19</sup>, deputy director of the Center for South Asian Studies at Fudan University; Yang Siling<sup>20</sup>, vice-dean of the department of South Asian Studies at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences; several researchers from the China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Hu Shisheng<sup>21</sup> and Wang Shida<sup>22</sup>, respectively director and deputy director of the Institute for South Asian Studies, and Su Jingxiang<sup>23</sup>; Ling Shengli<sup>24</sup>, director of the International Security Research Center of the China Foreign Affairs University; Zhang Li<sup>25</sup>, Research Professor at the Institute for South Asian Studies of Sichuan University in Chengdu; and Sun Xingjie, vice-dean of the College of Public Diplomacy at Jilin University in Changchun.<sup>26</sup>

18. Liu Zongyi, "How should China respond to the current Indian provocations? (中国应如何应对当前印度的挑衅?)", *Shanghai Institutes for International Studies*, 4 October 2020, <http://www.siis.org.cn/Research/Info/5130>.

19. "If India dares to open fire, we should be prepared and determined to do the same (印度敢开枪, 我们也必须要有开枪的决心和准备)", *Guancha.cn*, 8 September 2020, [https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2020\\_09\\_08\\_564431.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2020_09_08_564431.shtml).

20. Yang Siling, "The Bloody Conflict in the Galwan Valley: India's Dangerous Game and Its Impact on Sino-Indian Relations", *Journal of Yunmeng*, Vol. 41, no. 5, September 2020.

21. Hu Shisheng & Wang Jue, "Behavioral Logic of India's Tough Diplomacy toward China (印度对华示强外交的行为逻辑)", *Contemporary International Relations*, No. 7, 2020.



**MATHIEU  
DUCHÂTEL**

Dr. Mathieu Duchâtel is Director of the Asia Program at Institut Montaigne since January 2019. Before joining the Institute he was Senior Policy Fellow and Deputy Director of the Asia and China Program at the European Council of Foreign Relations (2015-2018), Senior Researcher and the Representative in Beijing of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2011-2015), Research Fellow with Asia Centre in Paris (2007-2011) and Associate Researcher based in Taipei with Asia Centre (2004-2007).

## China forced to abandon restraint

Not surprisingly, the main narrative in China regarding the origins of the clashes is to put the blame on India. The red thread running through Chinese analyses is to argue that Indian behavior has forced China to abandon its longstanding practice of self-restraint in managing the disputed border.

Ling Shengli argues more generally that other countries have conducted in-depth research of Chinese behavior on border issues, and concluded that China overwhelmingly adheres to self-restraint – **they assess that China “basically does not fight back after being provoked”** (基本不会强力反击). Ling describes the determination to counterattack as extremely important because the issue with India is a “contest of strategic willpowers” (战略意志的较量). According to Ling Shengli, China’s goal should be to let Indian decision-makers conclude that the international situation offers no window of opportunity to take advantage of China’s practice of self-restraint, and the use of force is a credible option on the table.

*Ling describes the determination to counterattack as extremely important because the issue with India is a “contest of strategic willpowers” (战略意志的较量).*

**No article presents a detailed factual chronology of events to back their claims, and the words “People’s Liberation Army (PLA)” are almost never mentioned – their aim is clearly not to offer insights into the operations of the PLA.** There are however two specific accusations directed at Indian troops. First, Hu Shisheng argues that the recklessness of the Indian border troops commander was the immediate spark that started the fire in the Galwan Valley last June. This echoes the view often made by the Chinese side in track 2 discussions.

Second, the August counteroffensive in the Pangong Tso lake area led the Indian military to seize control over some heights surrounding the lake. **Lin Minwang argues that the operation was aiming at gaining leverage in the ongoing talks with China.** It was conducted despite five rounds of meetings at the level of military-commanders that were succeeding in cooling down the border tensions after mid-June 2020 and had led to disengagement in some places.

But the main Chinese point is in fact more general: blaming an overall aggressive Indian posture on the border. **Hu Shisheng states that Indian border troops have crossed the LAC 1,581 times in 2019, of which 94% in the Western section.** The source of that number is not provided. Liu Zongyi goes as far as suggesting that the clashes could have been the result of frontline units not complying with their chain of command, conjecturing that they may have an incentive to be aggressive if their performance appraisal and promotion are tied to the “amount of Chinese territory they can erode” (绩效考核、军官升迁,都与能够蚕食多少中国领土相挂钩).

This argument is fueled by the Indian Defense Ministry’s decision that authorizes troops to use firearms. Indeed **immediately after the Galwan Valley clashes, the Indian Army changed its rules of engagement, removing the preexisting restrictions on the use of firearms, and allowing commanders “complete freedom of action” to handle situations at the border.**<sup>27</sup>

22. Wang Shida, “China’s strategy of ‘surrounding Wei to rescue Zhao’, India should not take the wrong step. (对华搞“围魏救赵” 印度莫犯糊涂)”, *Huanqiu*, 3 December 2020, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/40wmfux6jJB>.

23. Su Jingxiang, “China-India relations have reached a crossroads, will India turn to the US ‘anti-China alliance’? (中印关系走到十字路口, 印度会倒向美国的“反华联盟”吗?)”, *China US Focus*, 10 December 2020, <http://comment.cfisnet.com/2020/1013/1321041.html>.

24. Wang Chunrui, “There is a strong economic nationalism in India, Chinese companies should pull out when needed (印度存在强烈的经济民族主义情绪, 中国企业该撤时就撤)”, *The Beijing News*, 28 September 2020, <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/feature/2020/09/28/773665.html>.  
Ling Shengli, “On the Sino-Indian border issue, our strategic resolve needs to be firmly set out (在中印边境问题上, 我们的战略意志需要坚定亮出来)”, *The Beijing News*, 28 September 2020, <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/feature/2020/09/28/773651.html>.

25. Zhang Li, “Strategic thinking on building a new type of great power relationship between China and India (构建中印新型大国关系的战略思考)”, *Indian Ocean Economic and Political Review*, No. 1, 2020, [http://www.cssn.cn/gjgx/gj\\_ytqy/202008/t20200831\\_5176456.html](http://www.cssn.cn/gjgx/gj_ytqy/202008/t20200831_5176456.html).

26. Wang Chunrui, “There is a strong economic nationalism in India, Chinese companies should pull out when needed (印度存在强烈的经济民族主义情绪, 中国企业该撤时就撤)”, *The Beijing News*, 28 September 2020, <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/feature/2020/09/28/773665.html>.

27. “No restrictions on using firearms: India gives soldiers freedom along LAC in extraordinary times”, *Hindustan Times*, 20 June 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/no-restrictions-on-firearms-india-gives-soldiers-freedom-along-lac-in-extraordinary-times/story-pCFCaSAkMRschq50Tom1L.html>.

As a result, warning shots were fired by the Indian military in August and in September 2020.<sup>28</sup> Before the Galwan Valley incident, the two sides would mainly yell at each other at times of close encounter. During spring 2020, they engaged in hand-to-hand combat. The use of knives, clubs and stones was widely reported.

**Su Jingxiang from CICIR interprets this decision as the latest outcome of a longstanding and systematic policy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in power, that aims at the destruction of the foundations of India-China border management.** Prior to the 2020 clashes, two agreements constrained the military forces of the two sides: the 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility *along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas*<sup>29</sup>, and the 1996 Agreement between India and China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas.<sup>30</sup> The second text obliged the two signatories to refrain from using firearms within two kilometers of the LAC.

*“if India dares to open fire, we should be prepared and determined to do the same” (印度敢开枪，我们也必须要有开枪的决心和准备).*

This Indian decision is used by Chinese analysts to showcase China's self-restraint in border management and to argue that China has been pushed to respond. **Liu Zongyi advocates proportionate retaliation (我们的报复要对等): “if India dares to open fire, we should be prepared and determined to do the same” (印度敢开枪，我们也必**

须要有开枪的决心和准备). He advises the Chinese side to abandon excessive restraint and to stop binding itself with larger considerations regarding the China-India relations.

### China's perception of the Indian threat

Ling Shengli notes that the international environment, characterized by the intensification of the US-China rivalry, was assessed in India as a “window of opportunity to occupy Chinese territory” (侵占中国领土的机会窗口), This seems to be mainstream view among Chinese analysts, as already made clear by Yun Sun's<sup>31</sup> early analysis of Chinese discussions of the Himalayas border clashes.

Indeed, all Chinese analyses converge on the key importance of US-India relations in explaining tensions. What is going away, according to Su Jingxiang, is India's tradition of neutrality and non-alignment. **India is becoming – of its own free will – a “frontline country” (前线国家) in the emerging “anti-China alliance” (反华联盟) built by the United States.** Liu Zongyi narrows down specifically to the influence of the Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, the “symbol of the pro-US faction” (印度亲美派的代表), on Indian strategic positioning. He notes that Jaishankar compares India's current strategic environment to the epic war between the Pandava and the Kaurava, in his 2020 book *The India Way, Strategies for an Uncertain World*. He draws one major lesson for India: **waiting patiently for the dust to settle is not an option; joining one camp is the only realistic card to play to secure its interests when the game reaches its end.**

**This environment allows the Modi government, in the words of Yang Siling, to play a power game (权力游戏).** But for what aims? Chinese analysts see two different levels, the border issue and the larger strategic picture of China-India relations.

28. “India-China standoff: ‘Warning shots’ fired in fresh action along LAC in Ladakh”, *India Today*, 8 September 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-china-ladakh-lac-military-standoff-army-warning-shots-fired-exchange-gunfire-chinese-1719612-2020-09-08>.

29. “Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas”, *United Nations Peacekeeper*, 07 September 1993, <https://peacemaker.un.org/china-india-border-agreement93>.

30. “Agreement between India and China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas”, *United Nations Peacekeeper*, 29 November 1996, <https://peacemaker.un.org/china-india-confidence-agreement96>.

31. Yun Sun, “China's Strategic Assessment of India”, 25 March 2020, *War on the Rocks*, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-india/>.

On the border dispute per se, Chinese analysts tend to explain the border tensions by India's ambitions to recover Aksai Chin, the portion of Kashmir adjacent to Ladakh lost to China during the 1962 war. Yang Siling argues that the Indian military considers the Galwan Valley a gateway to Aksai Chin. Liu Zongyi is less categorical – **he sees India taking advantage of strategic cooperation with the United States and aiming to revise the existing Line of Actual Control, but India's specific operational goals are left to speculate.** Hu Shisheng is the only expert to provide a military balance tactical explanation to back his argument that the Indian side started the clashes. He argues that India has perceived the Chinese "border defense infrastructure activities" (边防基建活动) in the Galwan Valley area as a threat to the newly built 55-kilometers road between Darbuk, Shyok and Daulat Beg Oldie, the only land access for Indian forces to reach the Siachen glacier.

On the larger strategic level, besides India's choice to side with the United States, Liu Zongyi attributes three precise goals to India: **to force China to recognize their territorial claims with regards to the Line of Actual Control, India's regional sphere of influence, and India's status as a global power.**

This is however a power game India can't afford, according to Yang Siling. Chinese analysts seem to agree that India has little to gain from the conflict because the military balance is in China's favor. Similarly, **Liu Zongyi argues that even if some segments within the Indian military may want to provoke a war with China, India's options are rather limited.** The PLA is superior in terms of weapons and ammunition, but also in terms of transportation and logistical supplies.

### De-sinicization rather than decoupling

The clashes will leave scars, and thus the consequences for China-India relations may be broad and long-term. But there is also short-term and immediate impact, on the economic front. **The Indian government has indeed taken a number of retaliatory measures that limit the Chinese penetration of the Indian digital economy** – from keeping Huawei at bay in the construction of India's 5G infrastructure to prohibiting the use of 267 Chinese apps<sup>32</sup>, including Tiktok, WeChat and Alibaba. The Indian government also tries to attract China-based foreign companies seeking to diversify their manufacturing base in the context of the US-China tech war. Liu Zongyi notes that the Indian government "lobbies" large multinational corporations to invest in India, providing among other incentives an easy access to land.

Liu Zongyi notes that Chinese companies have invested USD 8 billion in India – some estimates put that amount as high as USD 20 billion. He argues that Chinese companies should make use of all legal options to address the unfair treatment they currently suffer in India, even if they are unlikely to successfully defend their rights. Chinese companies could contribute more to infrastructure development in India, but if "there are no longer benefits to gain from that market, when it is time to give up" (但是现在既然在这个市场中得不到什么好处, 该放弃时我们也只能放弃).

*Chinese companies could contribute more to infrastructure development in India, but if "there are no longer benefits to gain from that market, when it is time to give up, then we should give up"*

Ling Shengli sees in the dramatic difficulties experienced by Chinese companies in India a "microcosm" of

32. "Complete list of 267 Chinese apps banned in India: PUBG Mobile, Tiktok, AliExpress and more", *India TV Tech Desk*, 24 November 2020, <https://www.indiatvnews.com/technology/news-list-of-all-chinese-apps-banned-in-india-2020-667131>.

China going global. In Vietnam and Venezuela, there are political and geopolitical risks. **He advises Chinese companies to increase the pre-investment analysis efforts, and to strive to share benefits with local partners, because for Chinese companies to remain “aliens is not going to be sustainable”** (如果只是一个外来身份的话，可能是站不稳的)。Sun Xingjie also advises Chinese companies to work on their risk assessment capabilities in order to reduce their possible losses in the Indian market, and to consider pulling out when it appears no profits can be made.

Yang Siling sees the clashes having pushed China-India relations to a stage of “antagonistic decoupling» (将中印关系推入“对抗脱钩”阶段)。But the restructuring of global industrial production and supply chains is not an easily achievable objective. The Indian pharmaceutical industry is a good example.<sup>33</sup> It is prosperous and globalized, but it still depends on China for approximately 70% of its raw material. It took China 40 years to establish its central position in industrial supply chains. Therefore, Liu Zongli argues that **even with an intense effort, it would take India at least 20 years to achieve significant change to China’s current centrality**. Hu Shisheng questions Indian intentions. He sees a selective approach by the Modi government when it comes to “de-sinicization” (去中国化)。Besides the pharmaceutical industry, many Indian sectors depend on a steady supply of Chinese material and intermediary products. There is no obvious action to put an end to that dependence. **Hu concludes that the right word to describe the current Indian approach to reduce its dependence on China is “de-sinicization”, not decoupling – some ties will stay unchallenged as they are in the interest of India.**

*Besides the pharmaceutical industry, many Indian sectors depend on a steady supply of Chinese material and intermediary products. There is no obvious action to put an end to that dependence.*

<sup>33</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, Vihang Jumble & Maitreyee Kishor, “Indian Pharma: A Global Leader Under Pressure”, *Institut Montaigne*, 6 November 2020, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/indian-pharma-global-leader-under-pressure>.

### Towards turbulent coexistence

Chinese analysts are rather pessimistic regarding the future of China-India relations. The problem is highly structural from their perspective – this is about different visions of the international order. **Hu Shisheng sees a power contest between the PRC, which was born as the “negator of the colonial order” (殖民秩序的否定者), and India, which has inherited the colonial order (殖民秩序的继承者)**. Yang Siling detects a confrontation between two antagonistic world visions, the Chinese “community of shared future for mankind” (人类命运共同体) advocated by Xi Jinping, and India’s power game in its region. Hu Shisheng estimates that a “long period of volatility” (印中关系迈入长波动期是大概率的事) is almost unavoidable in China-India relations – this is the new normal. This creates a need for restructuring the relationship, but how?

Yang Siling’s position is the most radical and hardline. He has one advice to India: **“give up any illusion about the United States and seek rational coexistence with China, this is your only way out” of this crisis (与中国共谋理性共存才是印度的出路)**. This view echoes the analysis that India has no good strategic options. Wang Shida notes the Indian temptation to create a strategic diversion and displace the conflict away from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean and the maritime domain. This would be a strategy of “surrounding Wei to rescue Zhao” (围魏救赵), as the second of the 36 stratagems goes – create an occasion to attack an enemy where its forces are the weakest. While such intention exists on the Indian side, Wang Shida assesses that this strategy will

not work. **Despite being the leading power in the Indian Ocean, India is not strong enough to impose a hegemonic order and would not risk preemptive measures against China at sea.** There are however actions taken by the Indian side: the reinforcement of the Indian Navy's deployment in the Andaman-Nicobar Islands, the purchase of autonomous underwater equipment to better monitor Chinese deployments in the Indian Ocean, the dispatch of Indian Navy in the South China Sea... But taken together, Wang Shida concludes that they are insufficient to have a significant effect on the border situation.

Some analysts are more moderate, and see hope in a thaw given that there is a rational interest to pursue cooperation in some areas for both parties. Interestingly, this positive view does not come from CICIR, the think-tank affiliated with the Ministry of State Security and the closest to foreign and security policy decision-making circles in Beijing.

The most moderate, Zhang Li, argues that constructing a new strategic foundation for the relationship is an "urgent task". **His starting point is that China's foreign policy should work at creating a favorable external environment, and use its resources to boost economic growth** – this is the origin of China's advocacy for "harmonious coexistence" and "win-win cooperation".

To achieve that goal, "strategic positioning" (战略定位始终是关键) is the key. **Zhang Li notes that realist thinking damages the bilateral relationship, especially as it prevails in Indian circles.** However, he thinks that an Indian strategy of non-cooperation with China generates more harm for Chinese interests than it does for Indian interests. He invites the two sides to reflect upon the traditional foundations of their cooperation. China and India have both traditionally been "rule-takers" in the international order and still supposedly have a common interest in reforming global governance.

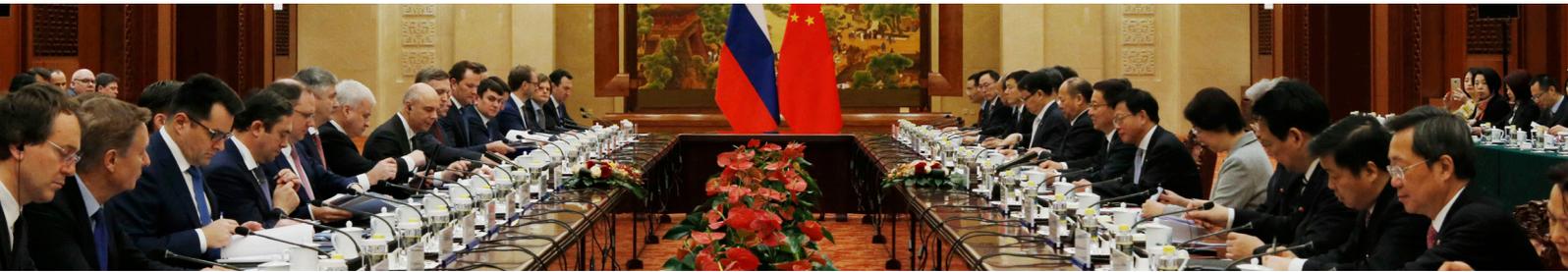
Ling Shengli sees a clear Chinese interest to prevent India and the United States to get even closer. Thus, he argues for grand strategic thinking when handling bilateral relations with India. In the foreseeable future, border issues will not be resolved. As a result, China should accept to play down the conflict, but not to the point of accepting any concession. The goal should be for China to ease the global pressure it receives from the pro-US camp. **The border problem with India can and should be dragged down (拖), and the key tactical question for China is how to drag it down further (但是拖的同时也要想怎么拖下去, 这个非常关键).** The method is an open question, but the goal should be clear: India should not be pushed further to the side of the United States.

The dividing line between Chinese analysts is the extent to which the US-India partnership is rock solid, and whether India is already part of a bloc. **The collection of Chinese views analyzed for this piece suggests that Chinese actions are determined by a macro view of relations with India, and ultimately aim at affecting great power competition with the United States.**

*China should accept to play down the conflict, but not to the point of accepting any concession.*

They also reveal their conviction that the military balance determines the range of policy options for China and India, and confidence that China is better positioned in the conflict despite the American support for India. This gives China the comfortable

option of choosing inertia and passing the burden of seeking a way out to the Indian leadership.



## THE RUSSIAN CONNECTION: STRATEGY OVER FRICTIONS

When asked about the possibility of a military alliance between China and Russia in October last year, Putin replied that “it is possible to imagine anything”. He then added that China-Russia “relations have reached such a degree of interaction and trust that we do not need this, but theoretically, it is quite possible to imagine such a thing”<sup>34</sup>. The same level of optimism is exhibited by the Chinese side. **“China is willing to work with Russia to continuously enrich the essence of bilateral relations and deepen the pragmatic cooperation between the two militaries”**, said Wang Wenbin, spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Military cooperation is seen as one of the manifestations of the China - Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era (新时代全面战略协作伙伴关系). In December 2020, China and Russia agreed to extend their agreement on mutual notification for launches of ballistic missiles and carrier rockets (中俄关于相互通报发射弹道导弹和航天运载火箭的协定) for another 10 years.<sup>35</sup> On this occasion, the Defence Ministers of China and Russia confirmed their willingness to strengthen practical cooperation between the militaries of the two countries. While there is no doubt that military cooperation is a key driver for the deepening of the China-Russia strategic partnership, there are two major questions regarding the future of the relationship in the defence sector. First, **how much does the Chinese military still need Russian systems, given the spectacular progress of China’s own arms industry?** And second, how do the India-China border clashes affect Russian policy towards China, given the traditional depth of Russia’s relations with India?

The dynamic and the balance of the arms transfer relationship is changing. It has been a long established goal since the establishment of the PRC to avoid being constrained by others (防止受制于人). According to Mao Zedong, “it is dangerous for a country to rely exclusively on foreign countries for its arms,” and “for a sovereign country to truly control its own destiny, it must first of all have a self-reliant defence industry.”<sup>36</sup> However, **reducing dependence in no way means ending military cooperation**. Wang Haiyun, a former Chinese

*“for a sovereign country to truly control its own destiny, it must first of all have a self-reliant defence industry.”*

defense attaché to Russia, stresses the historical bond that provides a solid basis for China-Russia military cooperation in the long term.<sup>37</sup> The Soviet assistance was key to the early development of China’s own defense industry - in the first half of the 1950s, China had 44 large-scale defense industry enterprises supported by the Soviet Union. Again, Russia was almost the only source of advanced weaponry for the Chinese military in the 1990s. And despite its rapid catch-up and its focus on innovation, China still faces severe challenges



**VIVIANA  
ZHU**

Viviana Zhu is the Policy Officer for Institut Montaigne’s Asia Program. She became the editor of the Institute’s quarterly publication, *China Trends*, in March 2020. Before joining Institut Montaigne in January 2019, Viviana worked as Coordinator of the Asia Program of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). She holds a Master’s degree in International Politics and a Bachelor’s degree in Politics and Economics from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, where her primary focus was China and international politics.

34. Djoomart Otorbaev, “Is a military alliance between China and Russia possible?”, *CGTN*, 15 November 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-11-15/Is-a-military-alliance-between-China-and-Russia-possible--VpYsZttEKQ/index.html>.

35. “Extension of China-Russia agreement on mutual notification for ballistic missile launches a guarantee for global strategic stability: FM spokesperson”, *Xinhua*, 16 December 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/16/c\\_139594415.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/16/c_139594415.htm)

36. Zhao Wanshu, “Mao Zedong’s strategic planning and practice of the modernization of China’s national defense (毛泽东对我国国防现代化的战略谋划和实践)”, *CPC News*, 27 March 2020, <http://dangshi.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0327/c85037-31650371.html>.

in several specific industry sectors. Military commentator Wu Jian notes that the initial stage of military cooperation between China and Russia was marked by military technology assistance from Russia.<sup>38</sup> But **as Chinese military capabilities improve, the relationship is becoming more balanced, with Chinese and Russians learning from each other (互学互鉴).**

According to Taiwan military expert Wu Mingjie, Russia has grown cautious in its arms sales with China, withholding technology to avoid being copied.<sup>39</sup> He also mentions that there were rumors that Russia welded the key parts of the Sukhoi Su-35's engine in order to protect the technology. The South China Morning Post also reports that in exchange for the AL-31F engine deals, China was asked to purchase more Su-35 fighter jets.<sup>40</sup> The conditions attached to the engine deal made it impossible for China to continue relying on Russian engines.

Despite these frictions, Chinese experts are overall positive about the future of China-Russian defense cooperation. A key factor is strategic. **Wang Haiyun argues that the development of China's military power contributes to the maintenance of Russia's national security, allowing Russia to focus its defense posture on the West and to avoid "two-front wars (两线作战)".** Harmony is beneficial for both sides, competition is a loss for both (和则两利, 斗则两败).

The China-India border clashes have tested to some extent China-Russia military cooperation. India is the first recipient of Russian arms exports - SIPRI data shows that between 2015 and 2019, India accounted for 25% of its arms exports, followed by China (16%).<sup>41</sup> According to Li Xiujiao, Associate Researcher at Heilongjiang University's Center for Russian Studies, **India has tried to convince Russia to abandon its neutral posture on the Sino-Indian border clashes and gain Russian political support in order to exert pressure on China.**<sup>42</sup> It urged Russia to accelerate the implementation of existing arms contracts, to deepen military-technical cooperation between the two sides, and proposed to sign more military procurement contracts. In particular, Russia promised to speed up the delivery of S-400 missile systems, the first batch had been initially scheduled to be supplied by the end of 2021.<sup>43</sup> The earlier delivery of existing arms contracts will boost India's capabilities vis-a-vis China, as well as Pakistan. The continuation of Russian arms sales to India after the China-India border clashes sparked some discussions over the implication of the sales on the China-Russia relations

*Li Xiujiao argues that Russia aims to use its neutral position to increase its leverage over China and India, as well as Indo-Pacific affairs in general.*

A People's Daily article notes that for Russia, as for any country whose main export is weapons, these serve its foreign policy goals and military interest.<sup>44</sup> It is a tool to nurture strategic cooperation, deter threats from other countries, ensure internal stability, and maintain the image of a great power. In the foreseeable future, **Russia will continue to prove its importance in today's international security and defense environment through arms sales.** Li Xiujiao argues that Russia aims to use its neutral position to increase its leverage over China and India, as well as Indo-Pacific affairs in general. Li also adds that Russia's "Look East policy" is not only about China, but also includes India, Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asia. He concludes that

37. Wang Haiyun, "The modernization of our army should focus on learning from the Russian army, instead of imitating the U.S. at all times (我军现代化建设应重点借鉴俄军, 而非处处仿美)", *Guancha*, 10 July 2020, [https://m.guancha.cn/WangHaiYun/2020\\_07\\_10\\_557075.shtml?s=fwrphbios](https://m.guancha.cn/WangHaiYun/2020_07_10_557075.shtml?s=fwrphbios).

38. Wu Jian, "Full-scale cooperation between China and Russia, 'a constant, not a variable' (中俄两国全方位合作, 是常量, 不是变量)", *Shenzhen Satellite TV*, 29 December 2020, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/MkKwJn5frwaARu9TdyWm\\_w](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/MkKwJn5frwaARu9TdyWm_w).

39. "Great Power Strategy: Russia's military sales to India, stabbing China in the back? (大国攻略: 俄军售印度在中国背后捅刀?)", *Radio Free Asia*, 26 June 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/zhuantlan/daguogonglue/dip-06262020095832.html>.

40. Minnie Chan, "China's next-gen J-20 stealth fighter jettisons Russian engine in favour of home-grown technology", *South China Morning Post*, 8 January 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3116826/chinas-next-gen-j-20-stealth-fighter-jettisons-russian-engine>

41. Pieter D. Wezeman, et al., "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019", *SIPRI*, March 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2020/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2019>

42. Li Xiujiao, "India and Russia Intensify Military-Technical Cooperation - How Does China Respond? (印俄强化军事技术合作—中国如何应对?)", *Guancha*, 13 July 2020, <https://user.guancha.cn/main/content?id=346235>

43. "Working hard to ensure early supply of S-400 missile systems to India: Russia", *The Times of India*, 12 November 2020, [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/79189588.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/79189588.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst).

44. "Russia Continues to Expand Military Equipment Exports to Reinforce its Dominance (俄持续扩大军事装备出口巩固优势地位)", *People.cn*, 14 July 2020, <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0714/c10111-31782411.html>

the decision of accelerating weapon sales to India is part of broader strategic considerations. Overall, Russia is balancing its interests between China and India and does not want to take a clear side.

According to Teng Ren, a researcher at the Statecraft Institution, Russia has basically adopted a neutral attitude towards the Sino-Indian border conflict incident for three main reasons: it respects the sovereignty of China and India, it resists U.S. involvement, and it hopes to maintain the mechanism of Russia-India-China trilateral cooperation and avoid causing disputes with tendentious statements.<sup>45</sup> He adds that Russia places great importance on trilateral cooperation and does not want any bilateral issue to harm the mechanism.

45. Teng Ren, "Russian Public Opinion on China-India Conflict and the Trend of China-India-Russia Trilateral Cooperation (中印冲突中的俄罗斯舆情及中印俄三方合作走势)", *Statecraft Institution*, 9 July 2020, <http://www.daguoce.org/article/12/1100.html>.

Li Xiujian acknowledges the limitation of the China-Russia relations. In the context of Sino-US confrontation, Russia may be tempted to take advantage of the situation (左右逢源). But **Russia's margin for manoeuvre is limited, as deepening military cooperation with India is unlikely to have any positive effect on US-Russia or US-India relations.** His analysis is echoed by Li Yonghui, Researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of Russian and East European Central Asian Studies. Li Yonghui explains that if China is defeated in the US-China competition, Russia will be the next target.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Russia cannot afford to "watch the fight between two tigers and take advantage of the result (坐山观虎斗)". Russia's relations with the West constrain its choices vis a vis China, and tie Russian security with China's. In addition, according to Li Yonghui, China's improved military capability diverts the risks Russia faces from the West.

46. Li Yonghui, "Sino-Russian Relations and the U.S. Factor in the Transition to the Post-Putin Era (向后普京时代过渡时期的中俄关系及美国因素)", *Journal of Northeast Asia Studies*, No. 2, 2020, <http://m.aisixiang.com/data/121481-2.html>.

In sum, **Chinese experts see the strategic rationale - Russia's and China's current positions in the international system - as structurally beneficial to the pursuit of their defense cooperation.** Their views echo Wang Yi's recent comments that "in developing China-Russia strategic cooperation, we see no limit, no forbidden zone and no ceiling to how far this cooperation can go".<sup>47</sup> A full military alliance may be unlikely in the near future, and frictions will continue in the area of military technology transfers: but the broad strategic direction has been set.

*A full military alliance may be unlikely in the near future, and frictions will continue in the area of military technology transfers: but the broad strategic direction has been set.*

47. "State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Gives Interview To Xinhua News Agency and China Media Group On International Situation and China's Diplomacy in 2020", *Xinhua*, 02 January 2021, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1844079.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1844079.shtml).

INSTITUT  
MONTAIGNE

Our mission is to craft public policy proposals aimed at shaping political debates and decision making in France and Europe. We bring together leaders from a diverse range of backgrounds - government, civil society, corporations and academia - to produce balanced analyses, international benchmarking and evidence-based research. We promote a balanced vision of society, in which open and competitive markets go hand in hand with equality of opportunity and social cohesion. Our strong commitment to representative democracy and citizen participation, on the one hand, and European sovereignty and integration, on the other, form the intellectual basis for our work. Institut Montaigne is funded by corporations and individuals, none of whom contribute to more than 3% of its annual budget.

## MEMBERS

## FRANÇOIS GODEMENT

Senior Advisor for Asia  
[fgodement@institutmontaigne.org](mailto:fgodement@institutmontaigne.org)

## MATHIEU DUCHÂTEL

Director of the Asia Program  
[mduchatel@institutmontaigne.org](mailto:mduchatel@institutmontaigne.org)

## CLAIRE LEMOINE

Program Officer - Asia  
[cleoime@institutmontaigne.org](mailto:cleoime@institutmontaigne.org)

## VIVIANA ZHU

Policy Officer - Asia  
[vzhu@institutmontaigne.org](mailto:vzhu@institutmontaigne.org)

## ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Institut Montaigne's Asia Program conducts policy analysis and advocacy work on Asia. Trends taking place in Asia are directly affecting European interests on a wide range of issues, from the future of global governance to the changing architecture of international trade, from climate change to the multilateral arms control agenda and our capacity to shape the international security environment. At the same time, public policy debates in France and in Europe on innovation, industrial and competition policies need to be nurtured by an understanding of China and Asia.

Pictures Copyrights:

**Amphibious capacities: the Taiwan Strait scenarios:** © Mark Schiefelbein / POOL / AFP

**The border clashes with India: in the shadow of the US** © Mohd Arhaan ARCHER / AFP

**The Russian Connection: Strategy Over Frictions** © FLORENCE LO / AFP

Sign up to our newsletter on the website!