

Strategic Alert

Is India Catching Great Power Assertivitis?



"Those days are gone when India had to beg. Now we want our right."

- Narendra Modi (1)

HCSS has been tracking great power assertiveness (GPA) since 2013. In 2015, we started including India in our GPA datasets based on a few criteria. In terms of its population, India is currently the second most populous country in the world and it is projected to overtake China within the next decade. In terms of geographical surface, it represents an entire subcontinent that is almost the size of the entire European Union. Its GDP (as measured by power purchasing parity) is almost 75% higher than Japan's and 2.5 times Russia's. Since 1974, India has been a nuclear weapon state. It also is one of the protagonists in the BRICS group of 'challengers'.⁽²⁾

Previous HCSS monitors found India to be significantly less assertive than the other great powers. In our 2016 [Great Power Assertivitis](#) study, we even claimed that the subcontinent was the sole exception to the rule that great powers seem to exhibit a quasi-pathological proclivity to throw around their weight in negatively assertive ways.⁽³⁾ In our last [Strategic Monitor](#), we noted that the ascent to power in India of the nationalist BJP had not (yet) led to an observably more assertive stance in world politics in our datasets.⁽⁴⁾ In our recently published [Changing International Order](#) (Geodynamics) Alert, however, which covers the first half of 2017, some of the indicators we use to track global GPA - especially our global event datasets - started painting a different picture of India.

An analysis of the quantitative and qualitative evidence over the last 6 months reveals a significant uptick in the country's economic and military assertiveness, specifically towards its great North-Eastern neighbor, China. These two contiguous great powers have recently clashed directly (at the border region) and indirectly via various strategic initiatives and extraterritorial frictions. India is directly implicated in two of what may very well be the top-5 risks of a major military conflagration today: renewed conflict with China and Pakistan (alongside a possible Sino-American military conflict in the China seas; a military conflict between the US and North Korea; and one between Russia and NATO).

Since the Indian subplot of the great power story receives so much less attention from Western governments, institutions and media, HCSS decided to take the opening of the United Nations General Assembly in New York today as an opportunity to take a closer look at some of the domestic and international dynamics at work here.

INDIA AT 70

This year, India celebrates its 70 years of independence in a more self-confident mood. Yet it also finds itself in a far more challenging regional and global context than ever before. Several domestic, regional and global pull and push factors are changing India's global positioning.

INDIA AT HOME

As the world's most populous democracy - and one of its most colorful cacophonies - India's domestic politics reflect its current level of socio-economic development and its deep cultural heritage. For the past few decades, India's politics were dominated by the (Brahmin) elitist, secular, socialist Congress Party of the Gandhi-Nehru dynasty. It pursued a model of

economic 'self-reliance' with state planning and a closed economy that led to anemic growth. It was this very Congress Party, however, that appointed the reformist and Western-trained Manmohan Singh as first Finance Minister (1991-1996) and then Prime Minister (2004-2014). In the period of his economic stewardship, the country started to - gingerly - embark upon a series of economic reforms that put the country on a more upward domestic trajectory. As for its foreign policy, India remained a country that punched below its weight and found itself reluctant to consolidate its (great) power and position as such on the international stage. Even when it became a nuclear weapon state, some qualified it as a 'reluctant nuclear power'.¹

In May 2014, the more religious (Hindu), nationalist, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Narendra Modi, a former tea seller from one of the lower castes, won a landslide election victory. It did so by promising a smaller, cleaner and more effective state to the (growing) part of India that is secular, modern and cosmopolitan; and more Hindutva ('Hinduness') to his Hindu-nationalist base.² Hopes that this would lead to more economic reform from both within and beyond India have thus far have not materialized.

Early in the period of BJP rule, the party lost a few state and local elections. This was interpreted by some as weakening PM Modi's hand, not only domestically but also internationally. Since then, however, BJP has gone from one electoral victory to another. It now controls almost all major states which puts it in a much stronger position to - if it is so inclined - start using the consolidated power base it has built for bolder domestic and international initiatives.

INDIA IN THE REGION AND ITS RELATIONS WITH GREAT POWERS

Modi's Hindu-nationalist policy stipulates a more muscular external policy and aims towards more recognition of India on a global stage.³ PM Modi's foreign policy identified Asia and its immediate neighbors as being of prime importance to India's foreign policy interests. Based on this 'neighborhood first policy', PM Modi invited regional political leaders to New Delhi and personally visited India's neighbors in a bid to improve relations. This active diplomacy, however, resulted in frosty relationships with some of these countries, particularly Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Myanmar, where some accused India of meddling in domestic politics. Parallel to this policy, Modi also introduced the 'Act East Policy' as a follow up to the 'Look East Policy' of previous governments.⁴ Act East is designed to provide a counterweight to China's growing influence in the region⁵. India is trying to achieve this by strengthening bilateral ties, economic flows and security cooperation with fellow ASEAN countries.⁶

Not included in the ASEAN format is India's big neighbor, China. India had for a long time been on par with China as one of the world's giants that remained largely mired in poor governance and poverty.⁷ The terms of power - and trade - changed in 1978, the year when China boldly - and consistently - opened its doors economically. It took India until 1991 to start with more modest - and stop-and-go - reforms⁸. While India is finally following China in lifting millions out of poverty, it is still lagging behind significantly. Since the beginning of this century, both India and China have been growing economically as well as politically, albeit at different paces.⁹ Given the widening power discrepancies between the two countries, China, which is much more focused on the G2, no longer sees India as a useful and relatively equal partner in challenging Western dominance of world politics. China has become much more assertive in ways that directly and indirectly challenge India - visible in (diplomatic) exchanges over the One Belt One Road Initiative (which India does not take part in), the recent military standoff in the Himalayas, and the strengthening of the Sino-Pakistan relationship through economic and military initiatives, viewed in Delhi with much suspiciousness.

While India's relations with regional powers such as Japan and Russia are important, the most important strategic and great power partnership India has is with the US. The Indo-US relationship under Modi, despite the historic difficulties, has improved significantly.¹⁰ The long-standing issues of civil nuclear energy cooperation, increased defense cooperation (through common exercises and arms trading) and alignment on other international matters, have been at least partially resolved, and the relationship between the two great powers seem to have reached an 'extraordinarily good place.'¹¹

Modi's alignment with the US stems from different (strategic) considerations; Modi's believe that India needs cooperation from the US to effectuate certain (domestic) policies, and perhaps most urgent, the need of US's support and cooperation to balance China's increasing influence in the region.¹² From the American side there is (or was) the perception that India is the only 'Western' power that could be a potential foil against the influence of China. Since India is the world's largest democracy,

is English speaking and has a government architecture that is recognizably Western, India makes a more natural partner for the West than China. Modi's wish to be part of the US Asia-Pacific strategy has further signified its desire for a strong relationship with the US, as Modi sees an opportunity to enhance India's own strategic autonomy by aligning itself with the US. "This signaling of the importance of the partnership with America in the Indian foreign policy matrix is the most important change the Modi government has made in India's foreign policy."¹³ In June of this year, Modi and Trump first met, reaffirming the bilateral ties and both nations heralding their military cooperation.¹⁴

WHAT DO OUR DATA SAY?

HCSS has been collecting different indicators to monitor great power assertiveness¹⁵. In our 'nowcasting geodynamics' efforts¹⁶, we primarily use our event datasets, since they are the only ones that generate 'fresh' real-time data about ongoing geodynamics from the past few days, weeks or months; as opposed to the more widely used country-year data sets that are often only produced after an interval of one or even two years. In this section, we survey findings from these various data sets.

CATCHING UP WITH THE BIG BOYS IN GPA?

As was noted in our recently released [Changing International Order Alert](#), India started exhibiting signs of great power *assertivitis* for the first time in our analyses based on our event datasets. By one of the indicators we use to track GPA over time, the Average Goldstein Score (AGS), India now appears to be amongst the most negatively assertive great powers in the military (where it even was the single most one in 2016) and legal categories.

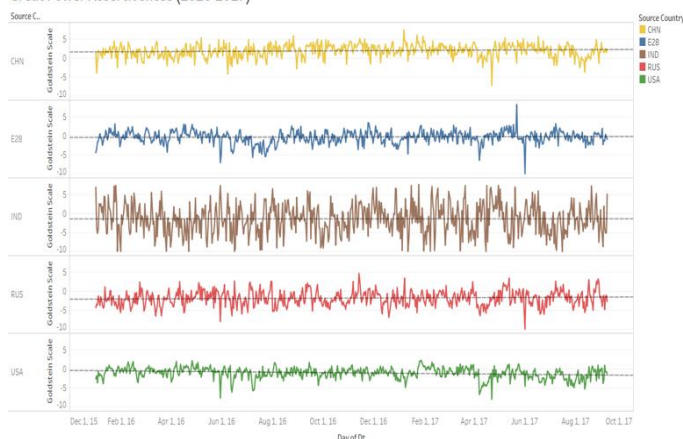
Great Powers Change table

DISMEL	Source..	2016	2017	Difference	Rank 2016	Rank 2017	Difference
Diplomatic	CHN	-5.52	-5.63	-2.1%	2	1	
	E28	-5.29	-5.24	0.9%	5	2	
	IND	-5.44	-5.19	4.6%	3	3	
	RUS	-5.66	-5.16	8.8%	1	4	
	USA	-5.38	-5.15	4.1%	4	5	
Economic	CHN	-8.00	-7.99	0.1%	1	5	
	E28	-8.00	-8.00	0.0%	3	3	
	IND	-8.00	-8.00	0.0%	1	1	
	RUS	-8.00	-8.00	0.0%	2	4	
	USA	-7.99	-8.00	-0.1%	4	2	
Legal	CHN	-5.66	-5.88	-3.9%	2	2	
	E28	-5.30	-5.35	-0.9%	5	3	
	IND	-6.51	-6.55	-0.7%	1	1	
	RUS	-5.53	-5.22	5.6%	3	5	
	USA	-5.50	-5.25	4.5%	4	4	
Military	CHN	-9.47	-9.18	3.1%	4	5	
	E28	-9.60	-9.60	0.0%	3	1	
	IND	-9.75	-9.52	2.3%	1	3	
	RUS	-9.43	-9.37	0.6%	5	4	
	USA	-9.64	-9.59	0.5%	2	2	
Security	CHN	-8.29	-8.70	-4.9%	5	3	
	E28	-9.17	-9.13	0.5%	2	1	
	IND	-9.24	-9.08	1.7%	1	2	
	RUS	-8.38	-8.64	-3.0%	4	5	
	USA	-8.86	-8.66	2.2%	3	4	

2016, 2017, Difference, Rank 2016 and Rank 2017 broken down by DISMEL and Source Country. Color shows Difference. The marks are labeled by 2016, 2017, Difference, Rank 2016 and Rank 2017. The data is filtered on Dt Year and Is Cooperation. The Dt Year filter keeps 2016 and 2017. The Is Cooperation filter keeps Conflict.

The GPA trend lines for the individual great powers over the first 6 months of 2017 (see below) show a negative trend for all great powers – with India showing the greatest deterioration and volatility.¹⁷

Great Power Assertiveness (2016-2017)

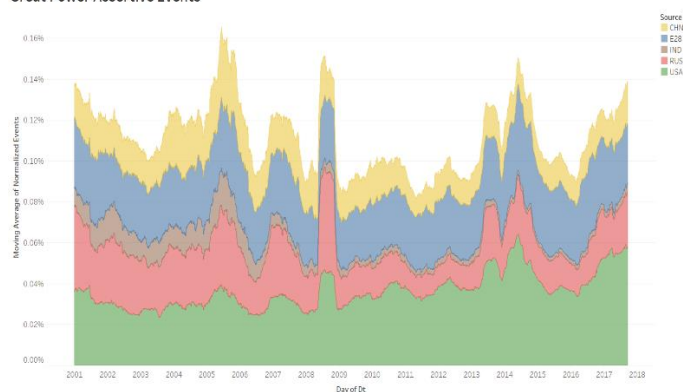


The trend of average Goldstein Scale for 50 countries broken down by Source Country. Color shows details about Source Country. The data is filtered on 50 Year, which keeps 2016 and 2017.

This comes as a relative surprise, since in previous StratMon annual reports, we had described India as the more pacific of the great powers in terms of assertiveness. These newer data, however, start suggesting that also India seems to have caught a bout of great power *assertivitis* by standing up militarily to adversaries, by pushing for recognition on the world stage by 'demanding' a seat at the UNSC and by investing in relations with (strategic) partners. We also see that India has been particularly active in asserting itself economically and diplomatically in many of its neighbors.

This is not the entire story, however. The figure below shows a different indicator that HCSS uses to track great power assertiveness. Whereas the previous figures reflected the average quality of India's dyadic relationships with other countries in the form of its AGS, this next one looks at the quantity of these assertive events¹⁸.

Great Power Assertive Events



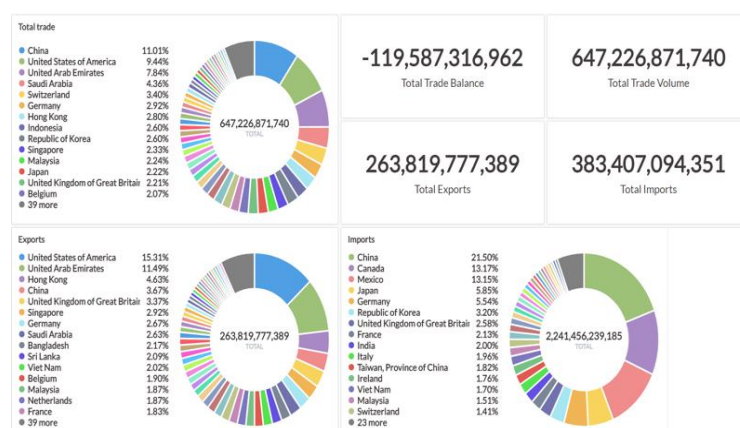
The plot of Moving Average of Normalized Events for 50 countries broken down by Source Country. The data is filtered on 50 Assertive, Dataset, Is Material, Is Cooperation, DISEL, Target Country and Corrections. The Is Assertive filter keeps True. The Dataset filter excludes IC, IVO and Phoenix. The Is Material filter keeps Material. The Is Cooperation filter keeps multiple members. The DISEL filter keeps multiple members. The Target Country filter keeps CHN, E28, IND, RUS and USA. The Corrections filter keeps True. The view is filtered on 50 Day and Source Country. The 50 Day filter keeps the last 50 years. The filter associated with this filter ranges from January 1, 2001 to December 31, 2017. The Source Country filter keeps CHN, E28, IND, RUS and USA.

As the visual shows, India's assertiveness remains significantly below that of other great powers in terms of the total number of events. This leads us to conclude that, while India is still initiating far fewer assertive events than its great power peers, the few ones that it does engage in tend to be qualitatively more negative. We will explore in the next section what lies behind these numbers.

INDUSTRIOUS INDIA

Since Modi has taken office, there has been an increase in India's total economic assertiveness. Over 2016 India's

assertiveness was high but remained fairly flat in its development. In the 2016 StratMon, we barely registered India, although we did note a modest increase in its relative positive economic assertiveness¹⁹. The biggest export countries for India are the US and, surprisingly, the United Arab Emirates. China remains the biggest trading partner of India, with an 11% share of total imported goods originating there. Interestingly, for the year 2017, economic activity primarily centered on Qatari and UAE sovereign wealth funds looking to invest into India in the form of affordable housing²⁰ and renewable energy respectively²¹. These developments match the observation in our most recent annual report that India has been aligning itself with the UAE, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan²². China's share of the total trade balance of India signals how strategically important it remains for India (and China) to maintain a good relationship.



NEGATIVE TRADE BALANCE WITH CHINA

During 2016, India has been particularly active in pursuing steel dumping investigations aimed at China, Ukraine, South Korea, Japan, Brazil and Indonesia. As the world's third largest steel producer, the domestic steel industry is of vital importance to Indian economic prosperity²³. India is set to overtake the second largest steel producer, Japan, and the introduction of duties on imported steel could strengthen India's market position. Yet Indian steel exports only make up a small percentage of the economy, with total metal exports contributing 8% in 2015. This stands to change in 2017, with steel exports increasing by 102%, although this is partly due to slowing domestic demand²⁴. India uses the vast majority of its steel production domestically, and should deals with European or Japanese parties to construct high speed railways be signed, domestic consumption could rise even further²⁵.

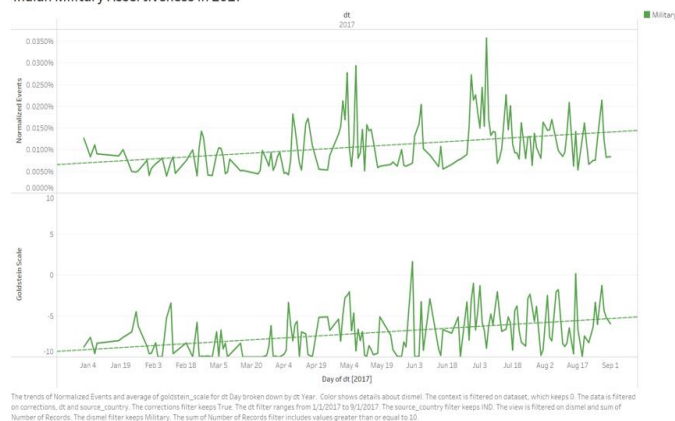
MORE MILITARY MUSCLE

More ominously, India is the country with the most negative military assertiveness score in the first six months of 2017 – also characterized by wild gyrations throughout this period. There is little activity until late 2016, when the problems in the Kashmir border dispute flare up once again, followed in mid-2017 by the Bhutan border conflict between India and China.

INDIA'S MILITARY ASSERTIVENESS UP

Indian foreign/military policy is primarily centered on its acrimonious relationship with Pakistan, as reflected in last year's event data. Border incursions in the Kashmir region are not uncommon, although the activity in late 2016 has been more substantial than usual, and has been characterized by multiple covert strikes from both sides²⁶. What has set India apart in 2017 are the events in Bhutan, which will be further examined in a subsequent section.

Indian Military Assertiveness in 2017



India's foreign policy is perhaps best understood in classical bilateral terms, in particular its ties to Russia, the United States, Pakistan, Japan and China.

WEIGHTY WEAPON CHOICES



Based on this dataset, which we presented in our 2016 *Great Power Assertivitis* report, we noted that 2014 did represent a

trend reversal in a number of military indicators for India. We saw spikes in arms exports (x5), in FDI outflows (connected with economic reform), in the number of troops deployed abroad (x2), in the number of cruisers/destroyers (x2), in modern AIFVs (x1.3), modern MBTs (x 4.7). We did stress as well (as the visual clearly shows), however, that overall figures remained comparatively remarkably low for a country that size. If we look at projected military expenditures for India for the next 5 years (see next table²⁷), however, we note significant increases across the board that will continue the trend reversal that started in 2014.

Projected Military Expenditures India 2014-2021 (in billions of USD)

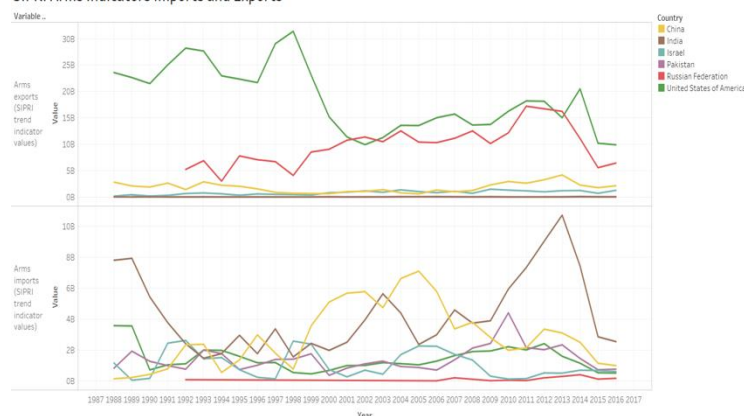
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Air Force Budget	8.98	8.67	8.93	9.28	9.87	10.57	11.62	12.71
Army Budget	25.55	27.85	32.88	32.55	33.43	34.10	36.36	38.59
Defence Budget	43.65	46.26	52.67	52.45	54.80	56.84	61.31	65.85
Defence-Wide Budget	3.72	4.06	4.62	4.62	4.93	5.12	5.52	5.93
GDP	1,984.6	2,135.3	2,281.7	2,451.8	2,640.0	2,844.9	3,064.8	3,297.8
Navy Budget	5.41	5.67	6.24	6.00	6.58	7.05	7.82	8.63
Total Defence Procurement	10.64	10.52	9.79	10.36	11.27	12.15	13.48	14.78

Air Force Budget, Army Budget, Defence Budget, Defence-Wide Budget, GDP, Navy Budget and Total Defence Procurement broken down by Year Year.

INDIA'S DEFENSE IMPORT DEPENDENCE

Compared to the other four great powers, India invests a relatively modest 2.4% of its GDP to defense, with military expenditures being a potentially leading indicator for a country's potential future military assertiveness.²⁸ Yet it is not the overall level of funding that sets India apart, but rather its dependence on imports, in particular Russian imports, which account for nearly 70% of the total. India's dependence on arms imports is caused by its lack of domestic defense industry, rendering India the only great power that is a net importer of arms. Indeed, India's bilateral ties have largely revolved around military power, be it through their ongoing arms race with Pakistan or their overtures to American and French companies in their efforts to modernize India's armed forces.

SIPRI Arms Indicators Imports and Exports



Over the past few years, the Modi government has increasingly invested in military ties with its close (strategic) partners – both traditional (Russia) and more recent (like the U.S., Japan, as evidenced in the [Malabar 2017](#) exercise in which the Indian, Japanese and US navies fielded a diverse range of platforms to

exercise air, surface and subsurface aspects of naval operations²⁹). These initiatives have, until now, confined itself to military exercises and import of weapons and technology. India accounts for 12.8% of global weapon imports in the period 2012-2016, with the majority coming from Russia³⁰. Yet there have been multiple changes that indicate the makeup of Indian weapon imports could change drastically.

The first, is that while Russian imports are still important, US-Indian weapon cooperation has increased significantly. This is partially due to the fact that the requirements for the Indian armed forces have shifted from conventional weaponry, towards high tech modernization efforts, in particular UAVs and electronic warfare capability³¹. In these domains, the US and Israeli defense industry have a substantial advantage over their Russian counterparts. Another dimension is that India conducts much of its foreign affairs through its arms relations, and lacking a domestic defense industry, India is acutely aware of the potentially lost economic opportunity and a strategic weakness. India is actively pursuing numerous defense cooperation agreements, including various collaborative projects with the US, Israel and Russia, possibly to bolster its nascent defense industry.

A second driver of change is the aforementioned modernization of the Indian military. As it stands, the Indian Army makes up the largest chunk of military expenditures. Much like the Chinese, the Indian Army is in need of personnel cuts, given the fact that 72% of its total budget is allocated to pension costs³². By comparison, the air force and navy only spend 34% and 28% on their personnel costs. The reallocation of funding from the personnel intensive army towards the equipment driven air force and navy is an underlying driver for weapon system procurements. European parties, most notably France, are gaining prominence in Indian weapon imports; a major deal for 36 Rafale fighter jets was signed in September 2016 as part of a budget increase to the aging Indian Airforce³³.

Most notable among these modernization efforts, is India's ambition to make its next domestically produced aircraft carrier nuclear powered. India has no experience in nuclear propulsion, and given the incorporation of the new US electro-magnetic aircraft launch system (EMALS), it seems highly likely that such efforts would involve the United States, which has already formed a joint working group as part of the Defense Trade and Technology Initiative with India³⁴. The strict US intellectual export control restrictions would almost certainly preclude Russian participation, a sharp change from previous years as India purchased a Russian aircraft carrier in 2013. Yet India, as always, is hedging its bets, and is also working on a Indo-Russian project to develop a 5th generation fighter jet as well as Israeli-Indian collaboration on bio- and satellite technology.

2017: CASES OF INDIAN ASSERTIVENESS

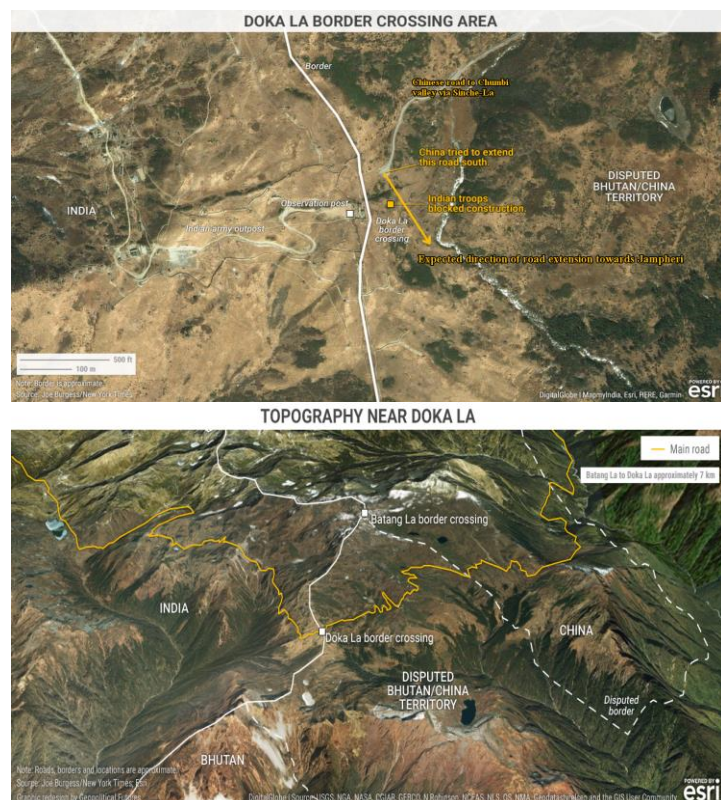
Modi's policies, both towards Pakistan and China, have shown "a degree of muscular resolve".³⁵ This attitude has had an impact on India's standing with its immediate neighbors, most notably China and Pakistan.

BHUTAN BRINKMANSHIP

Bhutan, a former land-locked protectorate of British India in the Himalayas, has maintained a close relationship with New Delhi since both countries gained independence. The 1949 Friendship Treaty between the two countries stipulated that "[T]he Government of India undertakes to exercise no interference in the internal administration of Bhutan. On its part, the Government of Bhutan agrees to be guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to its external relations."³⁶ In the intervening period, India, in its own words, carefully nurtured and fostered this relationship over many decades³⁷ - also economically³⁸. In return, Bhutan has stood loyally by India's side against Indian insurgent troops along the Assam border; in the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962; and in various disputes with Pakistan.

With China's ascendance, strategic dynamics in the Himalayas have started to change. China no longer feels the need to solve open boundary issues, or to show restraint in India's neighborhood, including Nepal, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bhutan³⁹. Some of these states have already started pivoting towards China, which has made an active and concerted effort to strengthen economic ties with these nations.

A combination of growing Chinese outreach to Bhutan and questionable Indian policies (such as cutting cooking gas and kerosene subsidies prior to the Bhutan elections in 2013)⁴⁰ have led to growing signs of unease in Bhutan. Yet nowhere has China and India's increasing friction manifested itself more concretely than at the Doklam Plateau this past summer.



This year's standoff began in early June 2017, when Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) engineers began extending a road on a remote piece of territory disputed between China and Bhutan and close to the Indian border⁴¹. This was not the first

time China has built roads in that area⁴², but up to that point it had never been seriously challenged. Bhutan, in its own (surprisingly late) official statement, claims its own troops first tried to dissuade the Chinese from continuing their work - but to no avail. On June 18th, 2017, Indian troops crossed the border with Bhutan with the consent of the Bhutan government, in order to block the PLA contingent from proceeding with construction⁴³.

China was probably surprised by this bold Indian move on what it considers to be its territory and reacted in unusually sharp terms, with the Chinese semi-official People's Daily even making references to the Sino-Indian war of 1962⁴⁴. But based on all available public evidence, the move by the Indian Army did bring Chinese road construction to a halt. China consequently demanded that Indian troops withdraw from the area, which India refused to do. For almost 3 months, several hundred soldiers from each side confronted each other at the nearby the Indian Army post of Doka La⁴⁵. On August 28th, both Chinese and Indian soldiers pulled out of the area⁴⁶. There was no official confirmation from either side that any Chinese concessions were made on future road construction.

To the credit of both parties, after this initial escalation of tensions, the two great powers appear to have been able to contain the situation at both the tactical and strategic levels (even though there are reports PLA troops destroyed a couple of small Indian military outposts⁴⁷). The three sides involved managed their strategic statements carefully⁴⁸, especially on the Bhutanese and Indian side⁴⁹. The final de-escalation also suggests that the sides continued to communicate and negotiate throughout the crisis.

Many commentators have linked the timing of the resolution to BRICS countries summit in Xiamen, China, that was only a few days away.⁵⁰ China and India de-escalated the 3 month military standoff in Bhutan during the [last BRICS summit](#). Both countries co-signed the Xiamen Declaration that specifically named Pakistan-based terrorist organisations⁵¹, something China has refused to do in the past, giving what has been considered a diplomatic victory for New Delhi.⁵² This decision by Beijing in turn might have an impact on China's relationship with Pakistan that has been strengthening through the OBOR initiative. At the same summit, Modi and Xi Jinping met for a bilateral meeting; "it was a forward-looking conversation" with an emphasis on "peace and tranquility on border areas."⁵³ Xi emphasized that China and India are "each other's important neighbor" and should focus on "seeking common ground while shelving differences and uphold peace and tranquility in our border areas" to bring the bilateral relationship "on a right track."⁵⁴

This suggests that institutional networking even in that part of the world may still exercise a certain pacifying influence alongside economic and/or nuclear deterrence, even if nuclear strategic stability is threatened by the dynamics of 'the Second Nuclear Age'⁵⁵. But it remains the case that the June 18th move by the Indian Armed Forces, instructed by the country's highest political leadership, was an act of high-risk brinkmanship. Even Indian former Minister of Foreign Affairs Shyam Saran explicitly acknowledged that this move was a first in many ways; critically, it was the "first time that Indian forces have engaged China from the soil of a third country."⁵⁶ Bhutan's actual position in this

matter remains unclear, but the fact that it only came out with an official statement on this issue on June 29th⁵⁷ with the more passive wording of its August 29th press release⁵⁸, suggests the Indian counter-move also showed traits of assertiveness towards its own close and loyal neighbor, which it fears may pivot towards China. On August 28th, both countries withdrew their troops from the site at Doklam.⁵⁹

The specificity of the Bhutan case was that India was even willing to confront China in a third country to protect India's interests. It was not a direct border conflict. But the past few months have also seen some direct physical clashes between Indian and Chinese soldiers along the border. One of those took place on August 19th along the banks of Pangong Lake in Eastern Ladakh⁶⁰, another part of the Himalayas where the PLA launched its main offensive in the 1962 war and where previous standoffs occurred in 2013 and 2014. The Line of Actual Control (LAC) between the countries also cuts through the lake, with India and China disagreeing on its exact location. Footage captured⁶¹ by Indian Lt Gen Prakash Katoch (Retd), provides visual evidence of how dangerous the situation is, as it appears to show soldiers on both sides kicking and punching, throwing stones, and hitting others with sticks and steel rods, which is claimed to have led to (minor) injuries on both sides⁶². The video has not been authenticated and neither the Indian nor Chinese side have commented on it. It raises many questions - not in the least who is fighting whom here, and - if these truly were Indian and Chinese forces - why no lethal force was used. It may be a part of a previously observed pattern.

CHINESE CHICANERIES

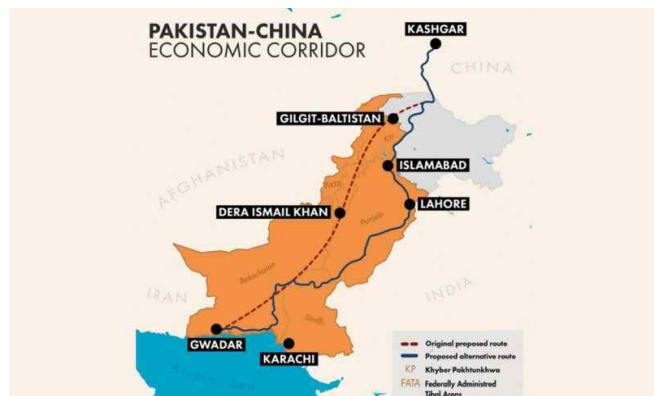
The Bhutan border dispute aside though, the Indo-China bilateral relationship is for a large part driven by mutual trade and economic interests. Both countries have clashed militarily before but increasingly find themselves in a confrontational relationship not just in border regions but also in more strategic proxy configurations such as the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Without careful diplomacy and communication between India and China, these trends will only stand to increase, as India is increasingly taking what it perceives as its natural place in the world order as one of the truly great powers. India's population and economic growth rate has the potential to match China's in the long run, even if the Indian economy is roughly a fifth of China's at the moment. Yet India holds a non-alignment policy, partially as a remnant from the Cold War and partially due to its colonial heritage, of not wanting to be beholden to any one power, a tendency that has led to its somewhat lukewarm Western collaboration in the past.

ANIMOSITY OVER WATERWAYS

Strategic alliances and partnerships that India involves itself in are another measure to counteract or mitigate China's increasing influence in the region, not just on land but also in the maritime domain. China's claim of territory and the ongoing disputes with the US and other countries in the region have hit the front pages frequently, most notably when concerning the South Chinese Sea. In reaction, India has called for "freedom of navigation and overflight in the waterway"⁶³ and "stepped up its naval presence far beyond the Indian Ocean, deploying a ship

to the South China Sea”⁶⁴. In addition, as we already mentioned, India has been aggressively pursuing an aircraft carrier program together with the US, in part to strengthen its ability to project power into the South China Sea as a counterweight to what it perceives as Chinese expansionism. The growing maritime importance of the Indian Ocean, which HCSS has examined in previous research, will potentially develop in another Indo-Sino hot spot⁶⁵. India is working on an expansion of its maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean while China expands its grip on this region. India feels more pressured and see these Chinese plans as “an attempt to gain permanent access to these waters and to ‘encircle’ India strategically”.⁶⁶

ECONOMIC PROXY STRIFE⁶⁷



China’s ever growing economic power has considerable geopolitical implications for India, which has seen its efforts to make inroads in South-East Asia largely rebuffed in favor of China, with the exception of Vietnam and Singapore. In response, India has sought to expand its economic influence westward, specifically in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and the UAE. Lacking domestic energy production besides coal, India has been importing large quantities of oil from Iran, although a recent dispute between Iran and India have seen that number reduced⁶⁸. Yet the Bhutan conflict, or something like it, could leave India isolated and surrounded, with a hostile Pakistan to the west and an aggressive China to the north and east.

Two Chinese initiatives, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiatives have agitated India. India refused to attend the launch of OBOR in May of this year, in protest against the CPEC activities in North Pakistan, an area India also has a claim on, and sees Chinese activities as a violation of its sovereignty. New Delhi sees the CPEC as having only a strategic, not an economic, objective.⁶⁹ There is some merit to this view, as various contested borders between India and China are part of the Kashmir region, and infrastructure development plans that are part of the OBOR initiative run squarely through Pakistani held Kashmir.

It is therefore unsurprising that China’s offer to mediate the dispute in Kashmir has been rejected by India⁷⁰. Indeed, China’s activity in propping up of Pakistan is a source of much malcontent in India, and is itself a manifestation of the larger regional hegemonic struggle between India and China. Given the volatile nature of Indo-Pakistan relations, and the overall instability of Pakistan itself, were Pakistan to experience further financial difficulties due to the rollout of the China-Pakistan economic corridor, this could exacerbate the potential for civil unrest in the country. In other countries in the region, with the

exception of the major oil exporting nations, we witness the impact of the large-scale presence of Chinese companies and workers on the social fabric, leading to local tensions⁷¹.

PAKISTANI PESTERING⁷²

It has been 70 years since Britain (hastily) partitioned its restless Indian empire into two dominions: the Hindu-dominated part of India, which was to become the Republic of India, and the Muslim-Dominion of Pakistan, which today is the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the People’s Republic of Bangladesh. Within months, the two countries found themselves embroiled in a formal war over the former princely state of Kashmir which was split in two along a disputed 750 km-long dispute. Since then, the two countries have fought two full-blown (but short) wars in 1965 and 1971 with a few thousands of casualties each, and numerous other armed clashes and skirmishes.



The two countries have also stirred trouble in each other’s parts of Kashmir by fueling insurgencies. Since the 2008 Mumbai attack, which involved a large-scale coordinated strike against soft civilian targets, the region had witnessed a relative lull in alleged Pakistan-sponsored attacks in India.⁷³ By December 2015, it seemed like relations between the neighboring nuclear powers were starting to thaw. The two sides agreed to resume high-level talks that had been suspended since 2012, and Indian PM Modi even made a surprise visit to the hometown of his Pakistani counterpart - his first visit as PM and the first to Pakistan by an Indian prime minister since 2004.⁷⁴ He appeared to want to extend a hand to the Pakistani government, to ease tensions and initiating a dialogue on better relations and was received with a red carpet welcome.

A few days later, however, jihadist infiltrators attacked an Indian air base in Pathankot, killing seven Indian soldiers⁷⁵. *India Today* claimed that “the brazen attack was carried out on the behest of Pakistan’s intelligence agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).”⁷⁶ This was followed by an attack on the Indian consulate in the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif⁷⁷, leading many analysts to speculate⁷⁸ that the Pakistani military and ISI might be trying to derail any possible peace process between the two countries. The official Indian reaction in these cases remained subdued. It was cautious about not implicating Pakistan⁷⁹ in the

attack and even invited Pakistan to participate in a joint investigation team to help collect evidence and to demonstrate its commitment to fighting terrorism.

This more cooperative attitude disappeared over the course of last year. In September 2016, a suicide attack on an Indian army camp in Uri⁸⁰ in Kashmir's Baramulla district killed 19 soldiers (the Hindustan Times⁸¹ claimed this was the single worst attack on the Indian army in 26 years); and two weeks later militants attacked another Indian Army camp⁸² in the same district, killing one Border Security Force officer. In this case, India was very public about the surgical strikes on alleged 'terror launching pads' that its special forces executed across the Line of Control.⁸³

Throughout 2017, the situation in Kashmir has remained particularly tense⁸⁴. Indian officials have continued to be very outspoken about alleged Pakistani subversive activities. In May 2017, they claimed that as many as 55 camps of Pakistan-backed militant groups⁸⁵ had been set up in in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) to plan and execute attacks in Jammu and Kashmir. In May 2017, India claimed that two Indian soldiers were beheaded⁸⁶ by Pakistani troops - a claim denied as 'baseless' by Pakistan's foreign ministry⁸⁷. In response, India dispatched 5,000 troops to the Shopian district of Kashmir in an attempt to 'flush out' militants⁸⁸. The contested Kashmir region is subject to repeated conflict and is generally considered to be one of the regions of the world most likely to see an outbreak of interstate warfare.

SO WHAT? STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

This alert focuses on the growing evidence in various datasets of increased Indian assertiveness. When we step back from these big, quantitative data sets to a more concrete, qualitative analysis of some of the key topics discussed in the expert community, we find these basic trends confirmed. We also find a number of explanations for this new and more assertive Indian external approach and behavior. Some are related to the *person* of Narendra Modi, who is depicted as very energetic and active leader who "seems to be acquiring a solid domestic political support for an effective pursuit of India's external relations through his profound communication skills".⁸⁹ Some are related to *domestic* developments in India - the fact that PM Modi now seems to have fully consolidated his political position within the country, giving him more leeway for bolder external policy initiatives. Other explanations are more *international* in nature - referring either to a growing need for India to 'balance' against an ascending regional hegemon - China; or to a (possibly even misplaced) faith in an improving relationship with the United States as an ally; or to the possible constraining influence of nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence and new emerging institutional regimes (like BRICS).

So far, growing Indian assertiveness has not exploded into concrete conflict. The outcome of the Xiamen BRICS summit offers some hope that the (objective and subjective) forces of intelligent restraint will continue to outweigh those of reckless brinkmanship. Our analysis of the first six months of this year, however, offers ample evidence for *both* these countervailing forces. If this increased Indo-Pacific brinkmanship were to

escalate into real conflict – a scenario that most experts continue to deem unlikely, even if with increasingly less confidence – would this matter at all to Europe and the Netherlands?

SO WHAT – FOR EUROPE AND THE NETHERLANDS?

Since India's independence 70 years ago, Indo-European dynamics changed. As Europe embarked on a process of dramatic economic and political opening - both internally and externally - after World War II, India followed a more inward-looking path with economic nationalism and mostly autarchic industrialization. Now that it may be starting to open up more, its importance to Europe, and with that to the Netherlands, is growing again. Bilateral trade between India and the European Union has [more than doubled](#) in the last decade, making the European Union India's number one trade and investment partner. India itself is only the [EU's 9th largest trading partner](#) (after South Korea but before Canada), with over €100 billion two-way trade in goods and services per year. In addition to being the main destination for Indian outward Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), the EU is also India's most important source of inward FDI – after Mauritius (a tax haven) – with almost €5 billion of EU outward investment to India in 2014. Investment from India destined for the EU was over €1 billion in the same year.

The Netherlands remain in the top 10 trading partners of India and in turn, the Netherlands is the 5th largest source of Foreign Direct Investment for India. The heads of governments of both countries visited each other earlier this year. As the country opens up more to international trade under the current Modi government, these economic stakes are only going to increase - and therewith also the risks that would accrue if something went awry. Militarily, India is starting to play an increasing role in the world. It has the 6th largest defense budget in 2016 (\$bn51 - an 18.4% increase from 2015, with 23.1% of that figure devoted to procurement)⁹⁰. HCSS has highlighted the growing importance - also to Europe - of the Indian Ocean⁹¹, and any conflict between China and India would greatly affect global supply chains - and thus international trade and economic growth.

INDIA AT CROSSROADS

In many ways, India stands at a crossroads for its own future prosperity. Being the newest, and internationally the most passive, great power, the potential that India has is undeniable. Its location, size and demographics indicate that India could match China's economic success story. Having the right components is not yet a formula for success however, and managing the domestic social and economic reforms properly will prove critical to India's future success. India's closer ties to the United States and European powers bodes well for its ability to develop itself militarily and economically but could aggravate China.

Furthermore, the global world order might be shifting under India's feet, from a US centric order to one dominated by China. The rise of Modi and Hindu nationalism has already translated into a more muscular foreign policy, as evidenced by the recent

Bhutan dispute. However, in terms of military capacity, while India holds an edge over Pakistan, it is outclassed and outnumbered against China. This illustrates the perennial problem that India faces: it is largely dependent on China for its imports, but it cannot abide further Chinese expansionism through the Himalayas; it simultaneously lacks the means to stop it. India could provide a counterweight to China, but it is not yet in a position to do so, while China, through its OBOR initiative, is actively seeking to consolidate control and prop up India's main enemy, Pakistan.

As we see an increase of India's assertiveness in our quantitative analysis, we also see an omen or confirmation of India settling in as a great power. In its pursuit of non-alignment India, has proven to be a sometimes reluctant partner, marked by contradictions. It seeks a 'Greater India', yet remains the least assertive of great powers. It is developing close ties to the United States, but remains Moscow's single biggest customer in terms of arms. India maintains a non-interventionist policy, yet crossed the border with Bhutan to confront the Chinese in a third country. India is a complex democracy that it is finally within reach of claiming the international prestige and respect that it has sought since independence. Whether it will be able to manage the difficult transition into an advanced economy that befits its status as a great power will deeply impact the development of Asia and the world. India's changing position in global geodynamics is a development that requires continued close monitoring – more than it has been receiving.

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