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US-China Competition, COVID-19 and Democratic Backsliding in Asia

Edited by
Giulio Pugliese
Andrea Fischetti
Michelguglielmo Torri

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A large, intricate, golden-brown mandala graphic on the right side of the cover. It features complex, repeating geometric and floral patterns, resembling a stylized sunburst or a traditional Indian mandala. The design is partially cut off by the right edge of the page.

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THE ROAD TO GALWAN VALLEY: AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW
OF INDIA'S RELATIONS WITH CHINA AND THE US SINCE 2005*

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This article analyses the reasons of the dramatic worsening of the India-China relation which became apparent in the 2020 border crisis, particularly during the confrontation which took place in the Galwan Valley. The analysis is focussed on the historical evolution of the India-China bilateral relations since the beginning of this century. It is focussed on two main themes: (a) the unsolved border dispute between the two countries; and (b) the role played in the India-China relation by India's increasing strategic and military closeness with the US.

The basic thesis of the article is that in 2005 the US consciously upgraded its connection with India to bring it inside the arc of containment it was building around its Asian adversaries, including China. New Delhi's new closeness with the US – a closeness which had a visible military dimension – could not but worry Beijing and cause a worsening in the India-China relationship. Up to the end of 2013, however, India's policy-makers, by implementing a complex set of policies, kept this worsening under control, reducing it to a bare minimum. Things dramatically changed in 2014, when Narendra Modi, India's new prime minister, abandoned India's previous prudent approach towards China, choosing to confront it and force it to accept India as an equal power. This brought about a downturn in the relations between the two countries which, in spite of some countertendencies, eventually resulted in the 2020 border crisis.

KEYWORDS – India-China relations; India-US relations; India-China border dispute; «2+2» India-US dialogue; India-US «foundational pacts»; China's aggressiveness; China and Jammu & Kashmir; China and Arunachal Pradesh.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which badly impacted on India's domestic policy, hardly had any direct effect on its foreign policy. Nevertheless, the apex of the pandemic, namely the year 2020, coincided with two important foreign policy developments. One was the most serious, most dangerous and longest border crisis with China since 1987-88, whose highest point was

* A previous and slightly shorter version of this article was published in *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*, Vol. 88, No. 4, October-December 2021, pp. 491-521.

the clash in the Galwan Valley (in the western sector of the border). The other important development was a qualitative leap in the consolidation of the strategic-military connection with the US, highlighted by the signing in New Delhi, on 27 October, of the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for geo-spatial co-ordination. This was the third and last «foundational» pact between the US and India, aimed at giving a concrete content to the US-India Defence Framework Agreement, originally signed in 2005 and renewed in 2015.

Most commentators and analysts in India and the West saw the heightening of the strategic-military India-US connection as the consequence of the India-China border crisis. In turn, the India-China border crisis was explained as the end product of that same Chinese aggressiveness which was visible in the China Seas, and in China's dealings with Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The goal of this article, however, is to show that the connection between the border crisis and the coming into being of a *de facto* India-US military alliance is much more complex than it appears at first sight. Chinese aggressiveness towards India – which undoubtedly exists – is far from being the exclusive or even the main cause of the deterioration in the India-China relation highlighted by the 2020-21 border crisis. Likewise, the consolidation of the India-US strategic-military connection is far from being a purely defensive reaction on the part of India, confronted by China's unrelenting aggressiveness.

This article moves from the belief that the 2020-21 India-China border crisis is the (provisional) final link in a chain of events which was set in motion many years ago. Accordingly, it must be explained through the historical reconstruction of India-China and India-US relations and of their correlation. This is what is attempted in the remainder of this article.

This historical analysis is focussed on three main turning points. The first occurred in 2005-2008 when both the India-US and the India-China relations – both on a positive trend – dramatically changed. While the India-US relation went through a spectacular qualitative improvement, that with China visibly worsened. As argued in this article, the spectacular improvement in the India-US connection was the result of a change of policy in Washington: the US policy-makers offered unprecedented support to India in order to bring her inside the US-centred arc of containment which Washington was building around its main Asian adversaries, namely Iran and China. Not surprisingly, this caused China's reaction and the worsening of the New Delhi-Beijing relationship.

The second period on which the following historical analysis is focussed includes the years 2008-2014. It was less a turning point than a period of equilibrium, characterised by India's ability to perform a difficult balancing act, without losing her balance. In fact, India got more or less all that she wanted from the US, giving in exchange very little. In particular,

New Delhi consciously escaped a too close – and, therefore, too constraining – strategic embrace with Washington. While at the end of this period the India-US relation had somewhat cooled, the US connection remained the mainstay of India's foreign policy. On its part, Washington continued to consider India as an indispensable non-treaty ally in Asia. At the same time, and rather counterintuitively, New Delhi was able to keep the worsening of the relation with China under control. There were tensions along the India-China border but, in the final analysis, they were minor. Also, the communication lines between the two governments were kept wide open and characterized by diplomatic visits at the highest level. The possibility that the two biggest Asian countries could reach a mutually satisfactory *modus vivendi* and restart the positive trend which had characterized their relationship prior to 2005 continued to appear real.

Things, however, dramatically changed in the third period, the one beginning in 2014. This article argues that, in this last period, India willingly discarded the equilibrium policy previously followed. A central aspect of India's new foreign policy became the urge to confront China with the aim of inducing it to accept India on an equal footing. Given the spectacular imbalance of power between China and India in favour of the former, India's new China policy could be pursued only if New Delhi accepted that same tight strategic embrace with Washington that the previous Indian governments had consciously avoided as dangerous for the maintenance of India's strategic autonomy.

Summing up, if one observes and analyses the 2020 India-China border confrontation from the above standpoints, the prevailing explanation of its origins and dynamics, offered in India and in the West, namely China's unwarranted aggressiveness towards its neighbours, appears to be of doubtful validity. Likewise, it appears to be of doubtful validity the thesis that India's growing strategic connection with the US has been a purely defensive reaction to Chinese aggression. It is on the explanation of these theses that the rest of the article is focused.

2. *The 2005-2008 turning point in Indian international relations*

At the beginning of the present century both the India-US and India-China relations were going through a positive phase. In the former case, they were pulled by the mutual convenience in promoting stricter and growing economic interconnections. The US had been India's main economic partner since the 1950s, but, given the mainly autarchic dimension of India's economy up to the 1980s, that had not had much relevance in the strategic calculations of either country. In summer 1991, nonetheless, India embarked on a new economic policy based on the promotion of neo-liberal reforms. The new economic policy not only accelerated India's rapid economic growth,

which had become apparent already in the 1980s, but resulted in the partial but substantial and ever larger opening of the potentially huge Indian market to international capital. The US capital was ideally placed to reap most of the economic advantages accruing from the opening up of the India economy, and, in fact, made the most of it. The result was the flourishing not only of the India-US connection, but the fact that, by the year 2000, despite an obstacle to be discussed later, it became clear that Washington had come to consider New Delhi as its closest partner in South Asia instead of Islamabad, as had previously been the case.

On its part, the India-China positive trend, ongoing since December 1988, had been predicated on the decision by New Delhi and Beijing to conduct their bilateral relationship «for mutual advantage, without being hampered by their disagreement on the boundary question».¹ The solution of the existing border differences had been left to a newly created Joint Working Group on the boundary question (JWG). The JWG arrived at a major clarification of the issue on 7 September 1993, with the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility² along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas. The Agreement delinked the solution of the border question – namely a final agreement defining the mutually accepted international border between the two countries – from the individuation of the line dividing the area de facto controlled by India from the area de facto controlled by China, or line of actual control (LAC). Also, the Agreement decided that the parties would «reduce troop levels compatible with friendly and good relations between them» and «undertake confidence building measures along the line of actual control» including by providing notification of troop movements.³ This agreement was followed by a second one on 29 November 1996, which reiterated the decision not to use force to solve border problems and, as a concrete implementation of confidence building measures, called for reduction of the respective border forces, the exchange data on them, the avoidance of large scale military exercises in close proximity of the LAC and, should anyway such large scale military exercises be deemed necessary by one side, its prior notification to the other side.⁴

1. Snehalata Panda, 'India—China Cooperation: Major Determinants', *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 64, No. 1-2, January-June 2003, p. 46.

2. In the Agreement, the word «tranquility» is actually spelled in the American way, rather than in the British one, usually utilized in India's official documents.

3. The full text of the Agreement is available at the Peace Agreements Database of the United Nations (<https://peacemaker.un.org/chinaindia-borderagreement93>). On the 1993 Agreement see also Snehalata Panda, 'India—China Cooperation: Major Determinants', p. 48.

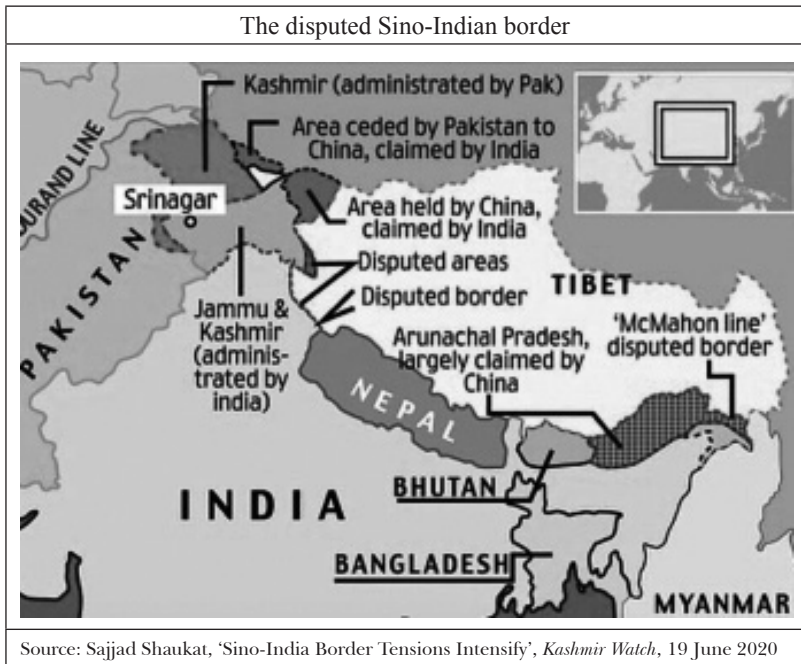
4. *Agreement between India and China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas*. The full text of the Agreement is available at the Peace Agreements Database of the United Nations (<https://peacemaker.un.org/chinaindiaconfidenceagreement96>).

These agreements actually brought about the de-escalation of the previously simmering military tension along the still undefined and un-demarcated common border. Less successful, however, was reaching a mutually acceptable agreement on the actual layout of the LAC. In 2001, the two parties exchanged maps on the 545-km «middle sector» of the disputed border, which, however, was the least contentious of the three sectors of the border. The situation in the Western sector – where India claimed around km² 37,250 controlled by China – and the Eastern sector – where China claimed some km² 83,740 controlled by India – remained unsolved.

Summing up, the period from December 1988 to 2005 saw the implementation of a series of confidence building measures, which substantially diminished the pre-existing tension along the border. They were coupled with the setting up of a mechanism to examine and try to solve the long-standing differences concerning the definition of a mutually acceptable border.

This positive trend was briefly interrupted by two moves made by New Delhi in 1998: the first was the decision to carry out a nuclear test involving the explosion of five atomic devices; the second was the attempt, on the part of India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, to justify the experiment, in a supposedly confidential letter to US President Bill Clinton, as due to the danger posed by a threatening northern neighbour, which, although left unnamed, could not but be China.⁵

5. As in the case of the first Indian nuclear experiment (1974), the motivation of the 1998 explosions had very little to do with India's foreign policy objectives, but were motivated by India's domestic situation. For an analysis of this point, see Kalpana Sharma, 'The Hindu Bomb', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 54, Issue 4, 1998, pp. 30-33; Chris Ogden, *Hindu Nationalism and the Evolution of Contemporary Indian Security: Portents of Power*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014, chapter 3 (*The Reality of Power, Pokhran II, and Domestic Dynamics*); Michelguglielmo Torri, *India's US policy 1991-2014: the gradual loss of strategic autonomy*, in Silvio Beretta, Giuseppe Iamini & Axel Berkofsky (eds), *India's Foreign and Security Policies. Friends, Foes and Enemies*, Heidelberg: Springer, forthcoming. Of course, stating that the reasons behind the nuclear tests are to be found in India's domestic situation at the time does not detract from the fact that India's policy aimed at acquiring nuclear weapons had evident foreign policy motivations. There is little doubt that India began (in great secrecy) its nuclear armament programme as a reaction to the atomic test carried out by China at Lop Nur on 16 October 1964, namely only some two years after the conclusion of the Sino-Indian war of 1962. See, e.g., George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999; Deepa M. Ollapally, 'Mixed Motives in India's Search for Nuclear Status', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 41, No. 6 (November/December 2001), pp. 925-942;



Not surprisingly, Beijing adversely reacted to the accusation made in the supposedly confidential letter to Clinton. The Indian government, however, was soon at work to remedy the consequences of their *faux pas*, and, in June 1999, Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh visited China. In July 2000, the visit to India of China's Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan signalled that «a level of comity more normal to relations between Asia's two giants had been restored».⁶

This mending of the India-China relations quickly progressed and culminated in Vajpayee's visit to Beijing in July 2003.⁷ As far as the border question was concerned, two main results were reached: the first was the *de facto* recognition on the part of China of Sikkim as part of India; the second was the appointment of two special representatives (one for India and one for China), in charge of speed up the already ongoing attempt at

6. John W. Garver, 'The Restoration of Sino-Indian Comity following India's Nuclear Tests', *The China Quarterly*, No. 168, December 2001, p. 865.

7. Prabhu Chawla, 'Historic visit to China by Prime Minister Vajpayee brings Beijing and Delhi closer', *India Today*, 7 July 2003.

clarifying the reciprocal border claims and find a mutually agreed solution.⁸ On the whole, however, the border question appeared to take second place compared to the decision to enhance the trade connections between the two countries. What is relevant from the standpoint of this article is the fact that the 1998 incident did not have any lasting consequence on the positive trend of India-China relations. In fact, Vajpayee's 2003 visit to China marked an unprecedented phase of bonhomie in the relationship between the two countries.

2.1. *The (positive) turning point in India-US relations*

The India-US connections, although flourishing since the early 1990s, had been somewhat hampered by an obstacle. This had been the US policy, followed since India's first nuclear experiment in 1974, aimed at forcing India to dismantle its atomic arsenal. At the beginning of the new century, the George W. Bush administration, while engaged in its «war on terror», radically reassessed India's weight on the Asian checkboard. The result was the realization of the importance of India as a «swing state» and the consequent decision to actively try to insert it in the US-centred web of treaty or non-treaty alliances spun by Washington around and against its main Asian adversaries: China and Iran.⁹ Having realized that no Indian government would ever give up the nuclear policy hitherto followed, the Bush administration decided to change its own: up to that point in time, Washington had actively hindered India's nuclear ambitions; beginning in 2005 it started to actively favour them.

8. Between 2003 and 2009, 13 rounds of «high-profile dialogue» were conducted by the two special representatives, but without reaching «a credible breakthrough». Zhang Li, 'China-India Relations. Strategic Engagement and Challenges', *Ifri*, September 2020. The fact that, in spite of continuing negotiations, ongoing more or less continuously since 2003, India and China have been unable to clarify where the border is and not even where the LAC lay is put down to Chinese obduracy by Indian and Western commentators. This interpretation, however, is not based on any hard proofs, which will be forthcoming only when the related confidential documentation will become available (which, of course, is not going to happen in a foreseeable future). In the final analysis, therefore, the idea that is China to be responsible for the stalemate of the border dispute is preconceived. Also, it does not square either with the fact that China has been able to solve the equally intricate border dispute with Russia or with India's reputation as a nay-sayer in basically all international negotiations in which it has been involved since independence.

9. On the concept of «swing state» see: Megan Garcia, *Global Swing States and the Non-Proliferation Order*, Washington: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2012; Daniel M. Kliman & Richard Fontaine, *Global Swing States: Brazil, India, Indonesia, Turkey and the Future of International Order*, Washington: Center for a New American Security (CNAS) and the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), November 2012; Daniel M. Kliman, 'Global Swing States and U.S. Strategy', *GMF & Ifri Policy Brief*, August 2013; Ted Osius, 'Global Swing States: Deepening Partnerships with India and Indonesia', *Asia Policy*, No. 17, January 2014, pp. 67-92.

As the US was still officially in favour of a policy aimed at preventing nuclear proliferation, Washington's radical upturn needed a fig leaf. This was found in the request to India to «disentangle» the production of nuclear energy for peaceful use from the production of nuclear energy for military use. Accordingly, India concentrated the military production of nuclear energy in one third of its reactors, whereas the remainder two thirds were officially dedicated to the production of nuclear energy for civilian purposes.¹⁰ At that point, Washington could put an end to its own ban on the supply of nuclear fuel and technology to India, claiming that the change of its Indian nuclear policy concerned the civilian sector only of the Indian nuclear industry. Moreover, Washington actively operated to remove the international nuclear embargo that it itself had promoted against India after the first Indian nuclear explosion in 1974.¹¹

Of course, Washington's claim that the end of the nuclear embargo on India concerned the civilian sector only was rather disingenuous. In fact, the possibility for India to procure nuclear fuel on the international market allowed her to concentrate her own limited – but far from being irrelevant – domestic resources of nuclear fuel on the expansion of the military sector.

The removal of the political and legal barriers excluding India from the benefit of US supplies of nuclear fuel and technology was rather complex. For different reasons – on which we cannot dwell here¹² – there was considerable political opposition to the India-US nuclear deal both in India and in the States. Nonetheless, oppositions in both countries were eventually overcome and the nuclear deal was finalized in 2008.¹³

The whole debate related to the nuclear deal was so prolonged and so fierce both in India and the US that most commentators and both public opinions appeared to be oblivious of – or, anyway, spared little attention for – the fact that the whole nuclear deal had been premised and was accompanied and followed by a US-sponsored policy aimed at giving to the US-India connection a strong military component. In turn, the new military

10. IAEA, *Agreement between the Government of India and the International Atomic Energy Agency for the Application of Safeguards to Civilian Nuclear Facilities*, INFCIRC/754, 29 May 2009; Council on Foreign Relations, *The U.S.-India Nuclear Deal*, (Background by Jayshree Bajoria & Esther Pan) 5 November 2010.

11. William Burr, 'A Scheme of «Control»: The United States and the Origins of the Nuclear Suppliers' Group, 1974–1976', *The International History Review*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2014, pp. 252-276.

12. For an in-depth discussion of this topic, see the India-related articles in *Asia Maior*, Vol. XVIII/2007 and Vol. XIX/2008.

13. On the so-called Agreement 123, see, e.g., Michelguglielmo Torri, 'Accordo nucleare, violenza politica e incertezza economica in India (Nuclear deal, political violence and economic uncertainty in India)', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XIX/2008, pp. 84-94; Maria Sultan & Mian Behzad Adil, 'The Henry J. Hyde Act and 123 Agreement: An Assessment', SASSI Policy Brief 11, September 2008.

component had two distinct aspects: one was progressing towards a de facto military alliance through the signing of a series of bilateral treaties, whose purported goal was reaching a situation of full interoperability between the armed forces of the two countries; the other aspect was the US design to enter the flourishing Indian arms market, hitherto de facto closed to the US, selling huge amounts of high technology – and, therefore, highly expensive – weapons and weapon systems to India.

The new military component of India-US relations was head-started in June 2005, namely even before the formal beginning of the bilateral negotiation of the civil nuclear agreement, with the signing of a US-India Defence Framework Agreement. As stated in the agreement itself, the pact heralded the fact that the India-US relations had entered a new era and that their defence relationship had advanced in a short time to «unprecedented levels of cooperation», unimaginable only ten years before.¹⁴

The US-India Defence Framework Agreement was renewed for an additional 10 years in 2015. It was accompanied by US pressure on India to sign a series of additional «foundational» pacts aimed at making possible full interoperability between the armed forces of the two countries.

It is worth stressing that New Delhi was then interested less in arms supplies and integration between the armed forces of the two countries than in promoting stricter and wider economic connections and receiving support at the technological level. As argued in March 2005 by an official of the US Embassy in New Delhi, in a secret cable later made public by WikiLeaks, the US «sales pitch would only work if it were connected to the wider economic and technological benefits the Indian side hoped to harvest».¹⁵

No doubt, in accepting the new US policy, the Indian policy-makers were mainly interested in reaping the economic and technological advantages accruing from it. But they could not but be aware that these advantages were neither offered nor given for free, as the US administration pursued its own objectives. As already hinted, some of the US's objectives were economic, particularly cornering the profitable Indian market for weapons imports and supplying India with the new nuclear reactors which India would build after the finalization of the civil nuclear agreement. Other goals, however, had an unambiguous strategic dimension, and were aimed against Washington's main adversaries in Asia: Tehran and Beijing. In other words, the not so hidden cost required by Washington in order to make India «a major

14. Manohar Parrikar Institute For Defence Studies And Analyses, *New Framework for the India - U.S. Defence Relationship*, 28 June 2005. See also Achin Vanaik, 'The Significance of the New India-US Framework Agreement on Defence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 40, No. 32, 6 August 2005.

15. Siddharth Varadarajan, 'U.S. cables show grand calculations underlying 2005 defence framework', *The Hindu*, 28 March 2011.

power in the 21st century»¹⁶ was the overturning of the positive momentum which was then the defining aspect of both the India-Iran and the India-China relations.

2.2. *The (negative) turning point in India-China relations*

It is worth stressing that, whereas the anti-Iranian goal of Washington's new India policy was clearly and openly advertised since the beginning, its anti-Beijing aspect had been left undeclared. Nevertheless, it was an objective which could not go undetected to any knowledgeable observer.¹⁷ Certainly, it did not go undetected in Beijing.¹⁸

The result was that, during the same years in which the new India-US relationship took shape, the India-China relationship entered a state of flux which saw the coexistence of two contradictory trends. The first, ongoing since December 1988,¹⁹ was the positive relationship head-started by Rajiv Gandhi's trip to Beijing. The second was a new and highly negative counter-tendency, characterized by increasing tensions and suspicions between the two countries. By the end of the 2005-2008 period, the second trend, without totally removing the other, gradually emerged as the dominant one.

Still at the beginning of 2005, the positive trend characterizing the India-China relation seemed to be increasingly pronounced. In April of that year, during Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to New Delhi, a series of no

16. As promised by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during her official visit to New Delhi in March 2005. See, e.g., 'US to help make India a «major world power»', *China Daily*, 26 March 2005.

17. For example, Paul Richter of the Los Angeles Times pointed out: «The White House was willing to risk losing ground in the worldwide campaign to limit the spread of nuclear weapons for a deal with India that could help it counter the rising power of China». Paul Richter, 'In Deal With India, Bush Has Eye on China', *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 2006. On his part, Ashley Tellis, the mind behind the US-India civil nuclear deal, noted that «a buildup of India's nuclear arsenal», a necessary consequence of the deal, would cause «Beijing to worry more about India and less about the United States». *Ibid.* On his part, Charles D. Ferguson, science and technology fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, commented the US-India civil nuclear deal by saying that: «The United States is trying to cement its relationship with the world's largest democracy in order to counterbalance China». Jayshree Bajoria & Esther Pan, 'The U.S.-India Nuclear Deal', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 5 November 2010. In 2016, Subrata Ghoshroy of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, analyzing the civil nuclear deal some years later, argued that «the accord was principally about two things: first, capturing the potentially huge Indian market, and second, making India a strategic partner in US efforts to counter a rising China». Subrata Ghoshroy, 'Taking stock: The US-India nuclear deal 10 years later', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 16 February 2016.

18. E.g., Chris Buckley, 'China state paper lashes India-U.S. nuclear deal', *Reuters*, 1 September 2008;

19. This trend had been disturbed by the 1998 Indian nuclear experiments, but only briefly.

less than 12 Agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) were signed, concerning the implementation of confidence-building measures along the common border, promotion of trade and cooperation, development of friendly institutional relations, financial cooperation and cultural exchanges.²⁰

The first and possibly the most important among these MOUs was the *Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question*, setting guidelines aimed at resolving some of the border disputes between the two countries.²¹ Wen recognized Sikkim as part of India and appeared not to oppose one of India's most eagerly pursued foreign policy goals, namely obtaining a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

The following year, which was declared «India-China Friendship Year», saw reciprocal diplomatic exchanges and a sequel of cultural events to celebrate the excellent relations between the two countries. Also, the acknowledgement of Sikkim as part of India was followed by the re-opening of the Nathula trading pass in that area, which had been closed since the 1962 war. In 2007, the Sino-Indian trade, which had been inconsequential before Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee's visit to China in 2003, was booming.²² The cordiality in the relations between the two countries was also highlighted by the carrying out of the first joint India-China military exercises.²³ Still on 14 January 2008, namely only a few months before the finalization of the India-US civil nuclear agreement, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, while in Beijing, signed a joint India-China declaration. It set out the «shared vision for the 21st century of the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China» and the common determination «to promote the building of a harmonious world of durable peace and common prosperity through developing the Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for peace and prosperity between the two countries».²⁴

20. The full list is in Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, Media Centre, *Synopses of Agreements/MOUs/Memoranda - Visit of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to India, April 9-12, 2005*, 11 April 2005.

21. Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question*, 11 April 2005.

22. The China-India bilateral trade, which stood at US\$ 4,946 million in 2002, reached 30,000 million in 2008. Swaran Singh, 'China-India Bilateral Trade: Strong Fundamentals, Bright Future', *China Perspectives*, Vol. 62, November-December 2005, Table 1 (China-India Bilateral Trade). See also: Phd Research Bureau, *India - China Trade Relationship: The Trade Giants of Past, Present and Future*, New Delhi: Phd Chamber of Commerce and Industry, January 2018.

23. David M. Malone & Rohan Mukherjee, 'India and China: Conflict and Cooperation', *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 1, February-March 2010, p. 144.

24. Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *A Shared Vision for the 21st Century of the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China*, 14 January 2008.

The apparent continuation of the positive trend in India-China relations disguised Beijing's unhappiness about India's growing closeness with the US to the eyes of most observers. Nonetheless, that something was about to go seriously wrong in the India-China relationship was unambiguously signalled by an interview granted on 13 November 2006 by China's ambassador in New Delhi, Sun Yuxi, to a private Indian television channel. During the interview, Ambassador Sun claimed the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh as an integral part of the People's Republic of China.²⁵

What made the statement particularly relevant and highly worrying was that it marked a fundamental departure from the policy hitherto pursued by Beijing, concerning its border disputes with New Delhi. This policy, even after the 1962 war and so far as the eastern part of the border was concerned, had been based on China's de facto acknowledgement of the McMahon Line, namely the highest crest of the Himalaya, as the border between the two countries. During the 1962 war, China had occupied most of what was then called North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), namely the area south of the McMahon which was later (20 February 1987) to become the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. However, after vanquishing the Indian army, the People Liberation Army (PLA) willingly retreated to the line it occupied before the start of hostilities, leaving NEFA under Indian control. In 1980, Beijing had formally offered to recognize the McMahon Line as the eastern border in exchange for India recognizing Aksai Chin as part of China in the western sector. Nothing had come out of that offer, which reiterated the position already taken by China before the 1962 war.

In 1985, Beijing, for the first time, claimed territory south of the McMahon line. That claim, however, appeared, and very possibly was, less a serious request than a bargaining point aimed to strengthen China's position at the negotiation table. Significantly, Chinese diplomacy did not give much emphasis to the claim on the territory south of the McMahon line. Also, in 2005, the bilateral *Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question* was signed. It stipulated that the resolution of the border dispute would not involve the exchange of areas with «settled populations».²⁶

Now, by claiming Arunachal Pradesh as a part of Tibet and, therefore, as a part of China, Ambassador Sun demanded a territory which was both south of the highest ridge of the Himalaya and inhabited. At the time, some

25. 'China lays claim to Arunachal', *Hindustan Times*, 19 November 2006.

26. For the text of the agreement see Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Agreement on Political Parameters ...*, 11 April 2005. For the whole question see, Neville Maxwell, 'Sino-Indian Border Dispute Reconsidered', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 15, 10-16 April 1999, pp. 905-918; David M. Malone & Rohan Mukherjee, 'India and China: Conflict and Cooperation', p. 153; Sudha Ramachandran, 'Arunachal Pradesh: Cultural and Strategic Flashpoint for Sino-Indian Relations', *China Brief*, 13 January 2016, p. 15.

commentators explained away Sun's interview as a diplomatic gaffe, rather than the public announcement of a fundamental reassessment of China's border policy. The fact itself that China's renewal of its claim on Arunachal Pradesh had been made in an interview with an Indian television broadcaster, rather than by Chinese state or party leaders through official channels, lent credence to this interpretation. This view was further strengthened by the way China's President Hu Jintao's official visit, which took place just a week after Sun's statements (20-23 November 2006), unfolded. The visit went off cordially, with priority being given to further promoting the rapid development of bilateral economic relations. The border problem was discussed, and its early settlement was described by both sides as a «strategic objective». Although no result was reached, there was the decision that negotiations would continue, while both countries would work together to maintain peace and tranquillity in the border areas. Express reference was made to the previous agreements on that matter, including the MOUs of 2005. It was also decided to expedite work on clarification and confirmation of the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Significantly, however, Beijing's newly advanced claim on the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh was not withdrawn.²⁷ This was an indication as clear as any that Ambassador Sun's Arunachal Pradesh-related statement, far from being a diplomatic gaffe, accurately reflected China's new position in relation to the border question. Taken together, Ambassador Sun's interview and the way in which the border question had been left pending during Hu Jintao's visit represented a very serious warning that the positive trend of the India-China relation hanged in the balance.

As the first warning appeared to have gone unheeded, in the following year Beijing reiterated its position in a more forceful way. In May 2007 it came the news that the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi had denied a visa to an Indian official from Arunachal Pradesh, as granting it would have been an implicit acceptance of Indian sovereignty on that area, which was contrary to China official position.²⁸ This was followed, on 6 June 2007, by Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi's statement, in the course of a meeting with his Indian counterpart, Pranab Mukherjee, in Hamburg. In that occasion, Yang not only officially claimed the whole of Arunachal Pradesh as part of China, but breached the guidelines contained in the above quoted April 2005 Agreement. Article VII of the Agreement unambiguously stated that: «In reaching a boundary settlement, the two sides shall safeguard due interests of their settled populations in the border areas». Yang, however, declared that the mere presence of populated areas (populated, that is, by non-Chinese inhabitants) in Arunachal Pradesh did

27. Rajshree Jetly, 'The Visit of Chinese President, Hu Jintao, to India (20 – 23 November 2006)', *ISAS Insights*, No. 16, 28 November 2006.

28. Nilova Roy Chaudhury, 'Arunachal officer denied China visa', *Hindustan Times*, 26 May 2007.

in no way invalidate the rights over this region that China had inherited from Tibet.²⁹

To put the hardening of China's negotiating position into proper perspective, two elements must be highlighted. The first is that Beijing, in spite of raising the bar on the border issue, nevertheless appeared determined to continue negotiations with India. The second is that Beijing's hardening of its negotiating position occurred when the Indian government's strategic rapprochement with the US was facing powerful internal obstacles, being severely criticized both by the official parliamentary opposition and by the left parties. The left parties, without being part of the Manmohan Singh government, offered it their support, and, with their vote, assured the government's majority in parliament. Moreover, even some members of the Singh government, in particular the foreign minister, Natwar Singh, and the minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Mani Shankar Aiyar, opposed the new policy. They were in favour not only of the continuation of the policy of increasing closeness and cooperation with Iran and China, ongoing since the late 1980s, but of its radical speed-up. It is therefore possible that Beijing, by stiffening its negotiating position on the border dispute hoped to strengthen the hand of the Indian opponents of the new pro-American policy.³⁰

If, however, China hoped to strengthen the hand of the domestic opponents to the civil-nuclear deal by stiffening its position on the border dispute, its attempt, came to nought. The Indian Prime Minister disposed of the opposition to the new US policy present inside his own government with the marginalization of Natwar Singh and Mani Shankar Aiyar in November 2005 and January 2006 respectively. Then he faced down both the official opposition and the left parties in parliament, defeating them, although, as suspected at the time and later revealed by WikiLeaks, not without a judicious recourse to corruption.³¹

Summing up, by 2008, India's closeness to the US, signalled by the finalization of the US-India nuclear agreement, had become the distinctive feature of New Delhi's foreign policy.

29. Pranab Dhal Samanta, 'China draws another hardline on Arunachal', *The Indian Express*, 7 June 2007. See also Jagannath P. Panda, 'China's Designs on Arunachal Pradesh,' *IDS Comment*, 12 March 2008, and Sujit Dutta, 'Revisiting China's Territorial Claims on Arunachal', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 32, No. 4, July 2008.

30. The thesis that China tried to use the Left parties to prevent the finalization of the civil nuclear India-US deal has recently been reposed in a memoir by Vijay Gokhale, a former high-ranking Indian diplomat. See 'China tried to use Left to scuttle n-deal: former foreign secretary Vijay Gokhale', *The Indian Express*, 3 August 2021.

31. 'Full text of WikiLeaks cable on trust vote controversy', *NDTV*, 17 March 2011.

3. *Successfully maintaining a difficult balance: India's relations with the US and China in 2008-2014*

3.1. *India's relation with the US: getting much and giving little*

In India, the new Manmohan Singh-sponsored pro-US policy had been criticized and opposed mainly because it was considered dangerous for the preservation of India's strategic autonomy. In fact, the promoters themselves of the new policy were not unaware of the risks involved; they, nonetheless, bet on their capability to receive all the support they needed from the US, while minimizing its cost. In particular, India's policy-makers bet on the fact that they would preserve their country's strategic autonomy, namely the ability to implement a foreign policy in line with India's national interests, avoiding – fully or, at least, to a large extent – any possible conditioning from the USA.

Rather counterintuitively, the Manmohan Singh-headed and Congress-dominated government, then in power, was able to reach – at least to a large extent – its goal. The Singh government wanted the end of India's international isolation regarding supplies of nuclear fuel and dual-use nuclear technology and it got it. It wanted the surge of economic relations with the US and the increase of FDI to India and, again, it reached its goal. It wanted the freedom to buy American weapons in the measure in which it was convenient for India, and even here it was able to reach its objective. India did not want to break the important economic connection with Iran and, in this field, although somewhat giving in to US pressure, India did it in such a limited way and behaving so smartly to be able to square the circle. In other words, it succeeded in devising and implementing a policy that satisfied Washington without displeasing Tehran. The number of India-US joint military exercises steeply raised, but New Delhi marked time as far as the actual implementation of interoperability between the armed forces of the two countries was concerned.³²

As above hinted, Washington ardently desired the Indian government's signatures of a series of bilateral pacts which would institutionalize military cooperation and give a concrete content to it. These pacts, nonetheless, not only in the evaluation of the critics of the Manmohan Singh government, but in that of some of its most influential members, in particular Defence Minister A. K. Antony, could result in the US's ability to manipulate India's defence capabilities. In this situation, Antony, acting on behalf of the Indian government, responded the pressing requests from Washington to sign the pacts by taking time. He never said openly no to signing the pacts, but continued to delay it, putting down the continuous postponements to

32. Michelguglielmo Torri, *India's US policy 1991-2014: the gradual loss of strategic autonomy*, in Silvio Beretta, Giuseppe Iannini & Axel Berkofsky (eds), *India's Foreign and Security Policies. Friends, Foes and Enemies*.

the intractable complication of Indian bureaucracy.³³ He was so successful in his stalling effort that, when the Manmohan Singh-headed government left power at the beginning of 2014, following that year defeat at the general election, no interoperability pact had been signed yet.

No doubt, in the long run India's stalling game was not without consequences. A feeling of uneasiness gradually crept into the US-India relation, and, eventually, it became evident in December 2013, following the outbreak of the Devyani Khobragade case.³⁴ Nonetheless, in the final analysis, not even the Khobragade incident succeeded in seriously damaging the relationship with the USA: the enhanced US connection remained the mainstay of India's foreign policy. On its part the US continued to consider India as a most important friendly nation in Asia.

3.2. *India's relation with China*

3.2.1. *The worsening of India-China relations*

In the period under analysis (2008-2014), India-China relations did worsen. In May 2008, during a meeting of BRIC foreign ministers at Yekaterinburg (Russia), China refused to approve the Russia-sponsored proposal to endorse India's bid for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council.³⁵ In taking that stance – which has kept ever since – China belied the possibilistic attitude it had taken on the issue only a year earlier.

Still in 2008, China began issuing stapled visas, namely visas on loose sheets of paper rather than visas printed on a passport page, to the residents of Jammu and Kashmir [hereafter quoted as J&K], citing the region's «disputed status».³⁶ In June 2009, Beijing openly opposed New Delhi's request

33. Siddharth Varadarajan, 'U.S. cables show grand calculations underlying 2005 defence framework'.

34. Devyani Khobragade, then India's Deputy Consul General in New York was arrested and strip searched by the New York police, which suspected her of visa fraud and false statements related to her domestic help, a woman of Indian nationality. Khobragade's arrest, which could not but have been green-lighted in advance by the State Department, and her subsequent treatment on the part of the police, caused a major diplomatic incident and the reaction of the Indian government. The American diplomatic personnel in New Delhi were subjected to a series of restrictive measures and, finally, in an absolutely unprecedented move, a New Delhi-based American diplomat was expelled. E.g., D. P. Satish, 'Devyani Khobragade incident: Both sides of the story', *News18 India*, 17 December 2013; Nissim Mannathukkaren, 'Nation, class and caste: the culture of servitude and the case of the Indian diplomat', *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 38, 2014.

35. See Sreeram Chaulia, 'UN Security Council Seat: China Outsmarts India', *Indo-Asian News Service*, 30 May 2008.

36. Both India and Pakistan claim as their own the whole of the formerly princely state of Kashmir, which they de facto partitioned in 1947-48. The partition

for a US\$ 2.9 billion loan from the Asian Development Bank. Highlighting for the first time its claims on Arunachal Pradesh in an international forum, Beijing objected to the fact that the requested loan included US\$ 60 million earmarked for «a flood management, water supply, and sanitation project in Arunachal Pradesh».³⁷ Some months later, in October 2009, Beijing censured Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Arunachal Pradesh during the electoral campaign for the local state assembly election, defining Arunachal Pradesh as a «disputed region». The following month, Beijing «openly protested the Dalai Lama's visit to Arunachal Pradesh».³⁸ In July 2010 China denied a visa to Lt. General B. S. Jaswal, who headed the Northern Area Command of the Indian Army, because its command comprised the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir, which, according to China, was a disputed territory.³⁹

Eventually, during the 2011 BRICS Summit in Sanya (Hainan, China) an agreement was found as far as the J&K question was concerned, and China resumed issuing regular visas to the residents of J&K and Indian army officials posted there. China, however, did not retreat from its claims on «South Tibet».⁴⁰ It must be noted, however, that while Beijing continued to claim what it called South Tibet and to practice its highly irritating (for India) visa policy, it also continued to urge India to seek a solution to the disputes between the two countries, «including the boundary ones». This was a result that, according to Beijing, could be reached through «the working mechanism for consultation and coordination on boundary affairs» and «through peaceful negotiations». In Beijing's considered opinion, the goal that both India and China should try to reach was «to ensure that this kind of dispute will not affect the development of the bilateral relations».⁴¹

of the Kashmir princely state left Pakistan in possession of its westernmost 40 percent and India in possession of the remaining 60 percent. The problem was further complicated by the demarcation of the border between Pakistan and China, sanctioned by the Sino-Pakistan Border Agreement of 1963. The agreement led to an exchange of territory between the two countries that left parts of northern Kashmir and Ladakh under Chinese control, a decision which, of course, has never been accepted by India. See, e.g., Pervaiz Iqbal Cheema, 'Significance of Pakistan - China Border Agreement Of 1963', *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 1986, pp. 41-52. On the problem of the stapled visa, see Sameer Patil, 'Decoding the stapled visa row', *Gateway House*, 1 May 2014.

37. Namrata Goswami, 'China's Territorial Claim on Arunachal Pradesh: Crafting an Indian Response', *IDSIA Issue Brief*, 25 October 2010, p. 2.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Sameer Patil, 'Decoding the stapled visa row'.

40. *Ibid.*

41. Manoj Joshi, 'Making sense of the Depsang incursion', *The Hindu*, 7 May 2013.

3.2.2. *The causes behind the worsening in India-China relations*

The thesis of this article is that, during the period under review, the bilateral India-China relationship worsened as a necessary consequence of India's new policy of military, nuclear and strategic closeness with the US. However, another explanation has been put forward and espoused by much of the literature. This is the theory that the 2008 global financial crisis convinced China's leadership that US world power was on the wane and the time had arrived for a much more assertive and aggressive foreign policy towards both its neighbours and the US. Therefore, the worsening of India-China relations in the post-2008 period was the necessary result of a more general change in Beijing's approach to international relations. In fact, India was only one of the countries put under pressure by China's new aggressive policy.⁴²

No doubt, the above explanation has a sort of geometrical potency and is not devoid of its own merits. Nonetheless, the fact remains that, in the words of a Swedish scholar, «a dissenting smaller body of research has cast doubt on the accuracy of some of the narrative's central claims».⁴³

Now, without delving in this rather complex debate,⁴⁴ this author's contention is that, as far as the central thesis of this article is concerned, it does not matter which school of thought one follows regarding the change or sub-

42. E.g., Andrew Scobell & Scott W. Harold, 'An "assertive" China? Insights from interviews', *Asian Security*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2013, pp. 111-131; Aaron L. Friedberg, 'The sources of Chinese conduct: Explaining Beijing's assertiveness', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2014, pp. 133-150; Oriana Skylar Mastro, 'Why Chinese assertiveness is here to stay', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2014, pp. 151-170; Andrew Chubb, 'PRC Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring Continuity and Change, 1970-2015', *International Security*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 2021, pp. 79-121; Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

43. Björn Jerdén, 'The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, Issue 1, Spring 2014, p. 48. For other examples of the minority school see: Yan Xuetong, 'The Instability of China-US Relations', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2010, pp. 263-92; Michael D. Swaine, 'China's Assertive Behaviour: Part One: On «Core Interests»', *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 34, 2010; Michael D. Swaine & M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's Assertive Behaviour: Part Two, The Maritime Periphery', *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 35, 2011; Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Stability and Instability in Sino-US Relations: A Response to Yan Xuetong's Superficial Friendship Theory', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2011, pp. 5-29; Alastair Iain Johnston, 'How New and Assertive is China's New Assertiveness?', *International Security*, Vol.34, No.4, 2013, pp. 35-45; Jonathan Dixon, 'From "Pearls" to "Arrows": Rethinking the "String of Pearls" Theory of China's Naval Ambitions', *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2014, pp. 389-400; Joshua Shiffrin, 'The rise of China, balance of power theory and US national security: Reasons for optimism?', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2020, pp. 175-216.

44. Which has been recalled, rather unnecessarily, solely in response to the objections of two anonymous referees.

stantial continuity of Chinese foreign policy before and after the 2008 global financial crisis. Rather, what is important to highlight is two other points: the first is that it is difficult to deny that, as argued in this article and overlook in much of the literature, the change of India's foreign policy in the 2005-2008 period could not but worry China's policy-makers; the second point – a consequence of the first – is that, given the policy followed by New Delhi, it is equally difficult to deny that a reaction on the part of Beijing was only to be expected, it does not matter whether China maintained its pre-2008 approach to foreign relations or adopted a new, supposedly more aggressive, one.

Taking into account all the above, what is particularly relevant from the standpoint of this article is that, in a period in which – according to the mainstream interpretation – the relations between China and its neighbours were suddenly and conspicuously deteriorating as the necessary result of Beijing's new aggressiveness, Sino-Indian relations followed a visibly different path. They did worsen, but, up to 2013, they worsened in such a limited way that it is possible to claim that such a worsening was of little political significance. One of the contentions of this article is that this did not happen by chance, but was the end-result of both a proactive effort on the part of India and of China's willingness to keep diplomatic and economic channels of communication with India open.

3.2.3. *Managing and keeping under control a difficult situation*

In the year 2008-2013, India's policy-makers acted with determination to limit the possible deterioration of the India-China relations by implementing a complex set of strategies. These included keeping open the communication channels with Beijing, through a set of high-level contacts; upholding and expanding the India-China economic connection; trying to find a solution of the unresolved border differences; managing the border incidents which were bound to happen through diplomatic means.⁴⁵

The efforts of India's policy-makers were on the whole successful. Frequent high-level meetings and the signing of a number of agreements did play a role in keeping the situation under control.⁴⁶ During the same pe-

45. Mihir Bhonsale, 'Understanding Sino-Indian Border Issues: An Analysis of Incidents Reported in the Indian Media', *ORF Occasional Paper*, No. 143, February 2018, pp. 24-26. See also Isabelle Saint-Mézard, 'The Border Incident of Spring 2013: Interpreting China-India Relations', *Hérodote*, Vol. 50, Issue 3, 2013, pp. 132-149.

46. In fact, during the 2008-2014 period, bilateral high-level meetings were no less than seven. The Indian Prime Minister visited China twice (2008 and 2013) and the Indian President once (2010). China's Prime Minister Wen Jabao and his successor Li Keqiang reciprocated with two visits to India (2010 and 2013 respectively). Moreover, the Indian Premier met China's President Hu Jintao and his successor Xi Jinping on the side-lines of BRICS summits of 2012 and 2013 respectively, and China's Premier Wen Jabao on the side-line of the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.

riod, the confidence-building agreements of 1993, 1996 and 2005, aimed at preventing or managing border crises, were followed by the agreements of 17 January 2012 and 23 October 2013.⁴⁷

While not much of concrete resulted from the high-level meetings, they at least conveyed the impression that the differences between the two countries were not insuperable and that an attempt was being made to find mutually acceptable solutions. Also, the confidence building measures – both those signed before 2008 and those signed afterwards – resulted in speedy and bloodless solutions of the frequent border incidents, most of which due to the undefined and un-demarcated nature of the LAC.⁴⁸ Finally, the positive trend in the economic interexchange between the two nations, head started by Indian Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee's visit to Beijing in 2003, did spectacularly improve in the period under review and, in 2009, India-China trade overtook India-US trade in value, which made China India's top trading partner.⁴⁹

No doubt, India's policy-makers were able to manage and limit the deterioration of the relationship with China also because of the willingness, on the part of the Chinese leadership, to accept New Delhi's efforts, despite Beijing's asserted new aggressiveness of its foreign policy.

Once all this has been pointed out, it is also necessary to stress that Indian policy-makers, adhering to the Machiavellian principle that diplomacy must be backed by strength, coupled their diplomatic activism with the judicious strengthening of India's defensive apparatus south of the LAC. In doing this, they continued a policy which had been head-started in 2006, clearly in conjunction with China's rising the Arunachal Pradesh question. Between 2008 and 2013, in the eastern sector of the border, two air bases were restored, two new infantry division were raised, and an attack corps for high altitude combat was trained; in the western sector a series of pre-existing airstrips and surveillance posts were renovated, while important road building projects were completed or begun.⁵⁰

India's activism in building up its defensive apparatus south of the undefined border was seen by some analysts as a move from a purely defen-

47. USIP Senior Study Group, *China's Influence on Conflict Dynamics in South Asia*, Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2020, pp. 36 and 48 (fn. 69).

48. Mihir Bhonsale, 'Understanding Sino-Indian Border Issues: An Analysis of Incidents Reported in the Indian Media'. On the nature of the LAC, see Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2020: Confronting China, aligning with the US', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 384-387.

49. David M. Malone & Rohan Mukherjee, 'India and China: Conflict and Cooperation', p. 144.

50. Isabelle Saint-Mézard, 'The Border Incident of Spring 2013: Interpreting China-India Relations', p. 155, and Manoj Joshi, 'Making sense of the Depsang incursion'.

sive position «to one which could also include offensive action».⁵¹ Be that as it may, India's military strengthening appears to have mainly been aimed to remedy a situation of weakness which could have obstructed New Delhi's pursuit of a satisfactory diplomatic solution of the border dispute.

3.2.4. *Skating on very thin ice*

Summing up, in the 2008-2014 period, on the surface the India-China relation appeared to be in a situation of equilibrium. It was, however, a precarious equilibrium, as it was endangered by two basic problems that the diplomatic skills of Indian policy-makers could manage but not solve. In the final analysis, the fundamental cause of the border-related tensions was neither the undefined and un-demarcated nature of the LAC nor India's claim on China-controlled Aksai Chin and China's claim on Arunachal Pradesh, nor China's new assertiveness in foreign policy; rather it was India's increased strategic and military closeness with the US. This explains why India's diplomatic activism aimed at normalising the relation with China had limited and/or ephemeral results. In turn this fed the lingering anti-China bias in the Indian public opinion. It was a bias which had been created by misreading of the causes of the 1962 India-China war, which Indian public, politicians and opinion-makers persisted in seeing as the result of an unmotivated and treacherous attack by China on a country that had always been its friend.⁵²

Together with the border problem, there was an additional problem, making a non-confrontational relationship between India and China difficult. It was the increasing India-China competition for the search and exploitation of new sources of energy and the related efforts by New Delhi and Beijing to protect the routes through which foreign-produced energy flowed to India and China respectively. The two countries were competing in much of the Global South, but above all, in Central Asia, in Africa and in the Indian Ocean, with Beijing being, on the whole, more successful than New Delhi.

Particularly worrying from New Delhi's viewpoint, were two aspects of Chinese activism abroad. One was the so-called policy of the «string of

51. As claimed by some Indian analysts. See, e.g., Manoj Joshi, 'Making sense of the Depsang incursion'.

52. Even a cursory examination of the numerous articles published on the subject in the Indian press on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the 1962 war is sufficient to prove the point. See also the articles listed in Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, *India and China: 50 years after 1962*, without date. As far as the causes of the 1962 Sino-Indian war are concerned, the reference work remains Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, Harmondsworth (Middlesex, England): Penguin Books, 1972 (1st ed. London: Jonathan Cape, 1970). Of the same author, see also 'Sino-Indian Border Dispute Reconsidered', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 34, No. 15, 10-16 April 1999, pp. 905-918.

pearls», that is the construction or strengthening of a series of ports in several Indian Ocean littoral or island countries, which, in perspective, could serve as bases for the Chinese fleet, more and more present in the Indian Ocean. The other worrying aspect, from New Delhi's viewpoint, was China's activism in South Asia and not only the tightening of its traditional friendly ties with Pakistan, but the creation of new ones with countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, which New Delhi considered as part of its own political backyard.

Although mainly motivated by the same economic causes which were behind New Delhi's activism in the Global South, in India the policy pursued by China particularly in the Indian Ocean and in South Asia was being read through the lenses of the anti-China bias prevailing in the Indian public opinion. Accordingly, China's activism in the Indian Ocean, and not only there, was read not as aimed at protecting China's crucially important energy and trade routes⁵³ but as an expression of a long-term and blatant aggressive *political* strategy aimed at encircling India. Also, most Indian commentators and Indian public opinion at large showed the tendency to see Indian activism in Asia and Africa as also or mainly aimed at *containing* Chinese presence in the countries with which Delhi had established or was establishing a strong relationship of political and economic cooperation.

By the end of the period under review, a third problem was taking shape and making India-China relations even more difficult. This was the emergence of Xi Jinping as the new Chinese leader, which strengthened the new assertiveness which had come to increasingly characterize China's foreign policy since 2008. Part of this increasing assertiveness was Beijing's «uncompromising [standing] on the issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity», which brought about a worsening of China's relations with Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan.⁵⁴

As noted above, China's new assertiveness had been successfully managed by India's policy makers. But at the end of the period discussed here and coinciding with Xi Jinping's rise to power, China's new assertiveness was the most probable cause of the only major border incident in the period under review. This was the three-week standoff in Daulat Beg Oldi, in the Aksai Chin area in April-May 2013. The standoff was provoked by a

53. Still in 2020, some 80% of China's trade passes through the Malacca Straits into the Indian Ocean. See, e.g., Navya Mudunuri, 'The Malacca Dilemma and Chinese Ambitions: Two Sides of a Coin', *The Diplomatist*, 7 July 2020; Gravitas desk, 'China's Malacca dilemma: How India controls Indian Ocean chokepoints', *Wion*, 19 November 2020; Paweł Paszak, 'China and the «Malacca Dilemma»', *China Monitor (Warsaw Institute)*, 28 February 2021.

54. Jayadeva Ranada, 'Looking Beyond Border Incursions & Li Keqiang's Visit', *IPCS*, Issue Brief # 241, August 2013, p. 3. See also Vijay Gokhale, 'The Road from Galwan: The Future of India-China Relations', *Carnegie India, Working Paper*, March 2021, p. 6.

platoon-strength contingent of the PLA moving some 10 kilometres inside what, according to the Indian conception of the LAC, was Indian territory and setting up a tented post there. The PLA contingent, which was soon faced by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, later strengthened by an Indian army detachment, only vacated the area after high level consultations involving representatives of the two governments.⁵⁵

Although «provocative»,⁵⁶ the incident was not aimed at starting a military confrontation with India: as noted by an Indian analyst, «the equipment carried by the PLA troops involved in this act did not point to any military intent».⁵⁷ In fact, the border incident of April-May 2013, if analysed in conjunction with China President Xi Jinping's statement in Durban on 29 March 2013, pointing out that the China-India border issue was to be solved «as soon as possible»,⁵⁸ appeared to signal Beijing's new urge in head-starting a new round of negotiation with India. In fact, a few months later, namely at the end of October, India and China signed an agreement on border defence cooperation, aimed both at preventing incidents and at streamlining channels of communication between the two sides, to prevent possible incidents from going out of hand.⁵⁹ It is possible that Beijing was aiming at a much more comprehensive pact. This, however, did not come to pass: the Manmohan Singh-headed, Congress-dominated Indian government was on its last legs, with the electoral campaign for the general election already in full swing and the possibility for the Congress to emerge from it victorious very tenuous indeed.

Once all the above has been noted, it must be stressed that, up to the end of the period under review, namely as long as the Manmohan Singh-headed and Congress-dominated government was in power, neither the anti-China bias, so present in India's public opinion and in most Indian political commentators, nor China's new assertiveness towards its neighbours deterred India's policy-makers from pursuing a prudent engagement policy towards China. Things, nonetheless, drastically changed after the 2014 general election, which saw the ascent to power of a new government.

55. Mihir Bhonsale, 'Understanding Sino-Indian Border Issues: An Analysis of Incidents Reported in the Indian Media', pp. 19-20.

56. Manoj Joshi, 'Making sense of the Depsang incursion', *The Hindu*, 7 May 2013.

57. Jayadeva Ranada, 'Looking Beyond Border Incursions & Li Keqiang's Visit', p. 5.

58. Mihir Bhonsale, 'Understanding Sino-Indian Border Issues', p. 14.

59. Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Border Defence Cooperation*, 23 October 2013.

4. *Willingly losing the balance: India's relations with the US and China since 2014*

The 2014 Indian general election saw the massive defeat of the parties previously in power and the victory of the rightist coalition dominated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and led by Narendra Modi. One of the reasons which made this election remarkable was that, for the first time after exactly 20 years, one party, the BJP, won the absolute majority of seats in parliament. To a large extent, this achievement was the work of its leader, Narendra Modi, who came to power surrounded by an aura of exceptionalism and invincibility. Since the first days of his premiership, Modi appeared bent to confirm this aura of exceptionalism and invincibility by rapidly implementing a set of policies aimed at showing that things in India had radically and qualitatively changed for the better. The activism of the new Indian leader was particularly pronounced in the economic field and, even more, in that of foreign relations.

While there are several, as a rule admiring, assessments related to a supposed «Modi Doctrine» in the field of international relations,⁶⁰ it is a fact that no «Modi Doctrine» has ever been systematically articulated either in any written document or in one or more public speeches. Of course, Modi's public speeches and statements related to India's foreign policy are several; nonetheless they do not amount to anything similar to a coherent and well-articulated doctrine of foreign relations. On the other hand, Modi's actions speak higher than any written document as far as his vision of the international relations is concerned.

No doubt, not differently from his predecessor, Modi's main political objective was to make India an internationally recognised major power. Again, not differently from his predecessor, and as clearly revealed by his actions from the very beginning of his term as prime minister, Modi thought that, in order to reach this goal, the support of the US was indispensable at both the economic and the strategic/military level. Here the main difference with Manmohan Singh – which is partly explainable by the US foreign policy under Trump (on which more later) – was that Modi progressively deemphasized the pursuit of the economic support from the US in favour of the quest for Washington's backing in the strategic/military field.

This is an aspect of the Modi foreign policy which is clear to everybody and has been continuously analysed and commented upon. But there is a second aspect of Modi's foreign policy, less emphasised but hardly less

60. E.g., Anirban Ganguly, Vijay Chauthaiwale & Uttam Kumar Sinha (eds.), *The Modi Doctrine: New Paradigms In India's Foreign Policy*, New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, in association with, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation, 2016; Sreeram Chaulia, *Modi Doctrine: The Foreign Policy of India's Prime Minister*, New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2016. For a more critical evaluation, see Ian Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019.

important. This second aspect is based on the idea that India's status as an internationally acknowledged major power could be conclusively validated only by India's ability to confront China on an equal footing. In fact, accepting, even implicitly, a subordinate position vis-à-vis China would mean acknowledging that India's position as a major power was devoid of any concrete content.

The China aspect of Modi's foreign policy has usually been seen as of secondary importance when compared to his US policy, and has often been explained as a series of ad hoc reactive moves to China aggressiveness. Nonetheless, it is possible to argue that it is the relationship with China that is central in Modi's foreign policy and that even his US policy is largely subordinate to the need to provide India with the economic and military resources necessary to counter China.

Two main ideas stem from the assumption that India is and must be acknowledged as on equal footing with China. The first is the idea that, while the economic connection with China may be useful (as shown by the Gujarat-China relations when Modi was chief minister of that state), it must take place inside a political frame based on the equality between the two nations. The second idea – in a way a consequence of the first – is that any Chinese move – economic, strategic, military or otherwise – which potentially translates into the growth of Chinese power world-wide must be resisted. In turn this assumption and its two corollaries are the basis for the China policy initially pursued by Narendra Modi. Such policy was articulated in the simultaneous implementation of two different strategies: one was China's (economic) engagement; the other her (strategic/military) containment. It is worth stressing, however, that the engagement element was structurally subordinate to the containment strategy.⁶¹

Modi's China policy nicely dovetailed with the China policy followed by the US since the Obama presidency. Nonetheless it is important to call attention to the fact that Modi's anti-China approach was not the result of any subordination to US policy. Rather it was an integral part of Modi's own Weltanschauung.

Before proceeding to analyse India's foreign policy under Modi two points must be made. The first is that one may or may not agree with the correctness in principle of India's objective to be recognised as an equal power by China. What cannot be denied, however, is the profoundly unrealistic nature of the idea. China's nominal GDP is 5.46 times higher than that of India;⁶² the difference is somewhat reduced if the GDPs of the two countries are compared on the basis of purchasing power parity (PPP) data,

61. For a similar conclusion, reached by its author through a completely different methodological approach, see Rajesh Rajagopalan, 'Evasive balancing: India's unviable Indo-Pacific strategy', *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, Issue 1, January 2020, pp. 75–93.

62. 'Comparing China and India by Economy, *Statistics Times*, 16 May 2021.

yet China's GDP remains little less than three times of that of India;⁶³ China's economic growth has been faster than that of India;⁶⁴ China is more technologically advanced than India;⁶⁵ China's armed forces are qualitatively and quantitatively superior to those of India;⁶⁶ the level of literacy of China's population is massively superior to that of India (93,3% and 66% respectively);⁶⁷ finally, there are very few possibilities that this situation will change in the foreseeable future.⁶⁸ In the last analysis, the only sector in which India will best China in a foreseeable future is that of the demographic size of their populations. In fact, all statistical projections indicate that India's population will soon outnumber China's.⁶⁹ This solitary victory, nonetheless, will be a Pyrrhic one; in fact, the power given by superior numbers will be sapped by the ratio of wasted and stunted people which malnutrition causes in India,⁷⁰ together with India's persisting lower educational level vis-à-vis that of China.

63. The World Bank, *GDP PPP (constant 2017 international \$)*. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.PP.KD?locations=IN>.

64. Vasil Gechev, *China & India: A Comparison of Economic Growth Dynamics (1980-2018)* (April 17, 2020). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3578163> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3578163>.

65. Ji Xianbai & Ying Pei, 'Is India losing the tech race to China?', *Gateway House*, 16 January 2015.

66. This is the necessary result of the fact that China's defence budget is nearly four times that of India. See Srijan Shukla, 'How India and China stack up in terms of military capability', *The Print*, 18 June, 2020, and 'Military Spending in Southern Asia', SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, 2020. See also: 'Military power of India & China', *ArmedForces.eu* (https://armedforces.eu/compare/country_india_vs_china); 'Comparison of India and China Military Strengths (2021)', *Global Firepower* (<https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-comparison-detail.php?country1=india&country2=china>).

67. 'Education > Literacy Stats: compare key data on China & India', *NationMaster* (<https://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/compare/China/India/Education/Literacy>).

68. Even a recent and most optimistic forecast, which (unrealistically) assumes that while China's GDP will slow down at 5% a year, India's will speed up at 8%, cannot but conclude that in 2047 India's GDP will still be only three quarters of China's. See Gautam Bambawale *et al.*, 'Strategic patience and flexible policies: How India can rise to the China challenge', *xKDR Forum*, Working Papers, No. 2, p. 25. These rather dismal conclusions are read by the Indian press as indicating that «there are possibilities for India to achieve extremely rapid growth over the next 20 years or so that will allow it to compete directly with its giant northern neighbour». See, 'India capable of achieving growth and compete with China in 20 years: Report', *Livemint*, 23 March 2021.

69. E.g., Hannah Ritchie, 'India will soon overtake China to become the most populous country in the world', *Our World in Data*, 16 April 2019 (Updated on 30 April 2020).

70. Diego Maiorano & James Manor, 'Poverty reduction, inequalities and human development in the BRICS: policies and outcomes', *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, Vol. 55 No. 3, 2017, pp. 278-302; James Chiriyankandath *et al.*, *The Politics of Poverty Reduction in India: The UPA Government, 2004-14*, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2020.

The second point that must be emphasised is that, in his pursuit of major power status for India, Modi willingly distanced himself from the cautious policy followed by his predecessors. As already noted, Modi's policy towards China, although not devoid of an engagement element, was coupled, since its beginning, by a confrontational aspect which Modi's predecessors had avoided. In the course of time, the containment aspect of India's China policy became dominant. In turn, the necessity to confront a hugely more powerful adversary pushed Modi to accept an ever-closer strategic embrace with the US. As noted above, it was that same close strategic embrace which his predecessors had avoided for fear of endangering India's strategic autonomy.

Before Modi, India had successfully performed a difficult balancing act, without losing her balance. Modi, on his part, decried this balancing act as a show of weakness and willingly discarded it.

4.1. *India's relations with China from 2014 to August 2017*

4.1.1. *Setting the guidelines*

Modi was a nationalist, although a Hindu nationalist rather than an Indian one.⁷¹ As such, during the electoral campaign which opened his way to the prime ministership, when speaking in Arunachal Pradesh (on 22 February 2014), Modi attacked the Chinese claims on Arunachal Pradesh and asked China to «shed its expansionist mindset».⁷² The Chinese government and newspapers, nonetheless, not only downplayed Modi's remarks,⁷³ but, once he became India's new prime minister, hailed him as a politician whose «functioning style is similar to that of the Chinese», and hoped that Modi, by playing a role analogous to that of another rightist politician, US President Richard Nixon, would radically improve India-China relations.⁷⁴ This hope was based on the fact that, during Modi's chief ministership of Gujarat (2001-2014), the economic relations between that Indian state and China had boomed. Also, during the same period, Modi, while unable to get visa permissions from the major Western countries because of his controversial

71. According to the Hindutva ideology espoused by Modi, the only true Indians are the Hindus, including those who profess a religion that Hindus consider as part of Hinduism (such as Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists, in spite of the fact that members of such religions do not generally consider themselves Hindus). All others – such as Muslims, Christians and atheists – are considered, at best, second class citizens.

72. 'China should shed expansionist mindset: Modi', *The Hindu*, 22 February 2014.

73. 'Chinese media downplays Modi's remark on Arunachal', *Hindustan Times*, 26 February 2014.

74. M.K. Bhadrakumar, 'Himalayan handshake for India's Modi', *Asia Times*, 5 June 2014.

role in the Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom of 2002, had been able to visit China several times, always receiving red carpet treatment from the Chinese authorities.

No doubt, the China leadership appeared eager to build a friendly relationship with the new Indian Prime Minister. His Chinese counterpart, Li Keqiang was the first head of government to phone Modi (within three days of his victory) to congratulate him on his victory. This was followed by a two-day visit in New Delhi (8–9 June 2014) of China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, aimed at preparing for the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping.⁷⁵ While, however, the Chinese appeared in a hurry to arrange a bilateral meeting, the Indians took their time. As a result, Xi Jinping's visit to India was planned for mid-September, namely later than desired by China.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, and before Xi Jinping's visit took place, it became visible that China's hopes about Modi were misplaced. The signals from the new Indian Prime Minister that the relationship with China would be framed in a series of strict conditionalities multiplied. The first was the induction in the new government of two well-known anti-China hawks: former general V.K. Singh, who was put in charge of Arunachal Pradesh as minister of State (independent charge) for the North East Region, and former master spy Ajit Doval, who was chosen as National Security Advisor.⁷⁷ A second signal was the absolutely unprecedented invitation of Lobsang Sangay, prime minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile, to the new Indian government swearing-in ceremony. Soon after, the new Indian Premier visited Bhutan, Nepal and Japan and received in New Delhi Australia's Prime Minister Tony Abbot. All these diplomatic contacts, while aimed at strengthening India's economic relations with those countries, had an unmistakable anti-China dimension. In a way, since the beginning, Modi appeared to be bent on building India's own anti-China arc of containment. This was part of Modi's China policy, which, as argued above, was based on both engagement and containment. Modi intended to negotiate an expansion of the economic connection with China, but planned to do so from a position of strength. Hence his contacts with Bhutan, Nepal, Japan and Australia, which, after Xi's visit, were followed by the relaunch of India's connection with the US and by Modi's visits to Vietnam and Mongolia. The visit to Vietnam was aimed at strengthening the already existing relationship, particularly at the

75. Jayadeva Ranade, 'Fresh overtures – Chinese Foreign Minister's India visit', *Centre for China Analysis & Strategy*, 11 June 2014; 'China: Foreign Minister's India trip has «great significance»', *The Diplomat*, 11 June 2014.

76. R. Hariharan, 'Strategising India's foreign policy', *Chennai Centre for China Studies*, 2 December 2014.

77. M. K. Bhadrakumar, 'Himalayan handshake for India's Modi'.

military level, with an adversary of China;⁷⁸ the visit to Mongolia aimed at establishing some kind of connection with a country which was afraid of Chinese influence.

Xi's India maiden visit, which initiated in an atmosphere of cordiality, saw the signing of a set of potentially important economic pacts. Things, however, took a sudden turn for the worse when, on the evening of 18 September 2014, namely the second day of Xi's visit, the news came that a detachment of some 1000 Chinese military had intruded into the Indian side of the LAC. The atmosphere of Xi's visit turned icy, and, significantly, it was concluded by two separate final communiqués, rather than a joint one.⁷⁹

4.1.2. *From engagement to containment*

The September 2014 border incident, which marred Xi's supposed «landmark visit»⁸⁰ to India, perplexed many commentators at the time and has left a question mark about its causes.⁸¹ In the final analysis, however, only two explanations are possible: the first is that the incident happened because of the initiative of some local commander, who acted without the knowledge of the Chinese government; the second is that the incident was Beijing's warning to New Delhi that any anti-China containment policy – either independently pursued or implemented in agreement with the US – would be countered by putting pressure on the India-China border.

If, however, the goal of the incident was to dissuade India from pursuing an anti-China containment policy, it did not reach any result. As already noted, after Xi's visit, Modi continued to implement his containment policy towards China, relaunching the connection with the US and trying to strengthen India's connections with Vietnam and Mongolia. Nevertheless, he also went on with his engagement policy, which took the shape of a series of further meetings with the Chinese President, either during official visits or on the side-lines of international meetings.⁸² Beginning in 2016, nonethe-

78. The India-Vietnam relationship is often seen as analogous to the China-Pakistan one. See, e.g., Aditi Malhotra, 'Indo-Vietnam Relations: An Answer to Sino-Pak Partnership?', *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India*, Vol. 8, Part 1, pp. 71-92.

79. Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2014: the annihilation of the Congress Party and the beginning of the Modi era', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXV/2014, pp. 319-320.

80. Srinivas Mazumdaru, 'Xi Jinping's landmark visit to India', *Deutsche Welle*, 19 September 2014.

81. According to some commentators, the incident had been caused by members of the Chinese military apex, who opposed a rapprochement with India. See, e.g., Eric Meyer, 'Who sabotaged Chinese President Xi Jinping's India visit?', *Forbes*, 23 September 2014.

82. See, e.g., 'PM Modi's meetings with China's Xi Jinping: A timeline', *The Times of India*, 28 June 2018; 'Despite Modi's 5 China trips & 18 meetings with Xi, Sino-Indian border dispute escalates', *Manorama Online*, 17 June 2020

less, the containment aspect of Modi's China policy became dominant, relegating to a secondary role the engagement aspect. This turning point was determined by Modi's evaluation of Xi Jinping's global infrastructure development strategy abroad as a clear and present political danger for India.

China's global infrastructure development strategy abroad – originally dubbed, in English, OBOR («One Belt, One Road) and then BRI (Belt and Road Initiative)⁸³ – had been strongly advocated by Xi Jinping and had become the centrepiece of China's foreign policy since 2013. This policy responded to a series of economic and strategic needs. From an economic standpoint, the project allowed China to employ abroad massive reserves of capital which could not be absorbed by China's internal market. From a strategic viewpoint, the building of traditional and novel infrastructures connecting China to the remainder of Eurasia aimed at opening a series of communication routes which, differently from the sea routes through which China exported most of its goods and received most of its energy supplies, were, if not beyond the military reach of the US and its allies, much more difficult to sever.⁸⁴

As already noted, India's public opinion and policy-makers had the tendency to view any activity abroad on the part of China – economic or otherwise – as politically motivated and, more often than not, aimed at damaging or containing India. In relation to the BRI, this kind of perception solidified in 2015 and 2016, when it became clear that a key part of it was the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Launched in April 2015, the CPEC consisted in a series of highways, railways and energy ventures connecting Western China to the Pakistani China-developed Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea. India justified its total opposition to CPEC by claiming that it was in violation of India's sovereignty as it passed through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), namely a territory that New Delhi claimed as its own, accusing Pakistan to have illegally occupied it (in 1947).⁸⁵ In fact, what irked India was the increase in power

83. On the reasons why the English denomination of the project was changed (in 2016) from OBOR to BRI, see, e.g., Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 'BRI Instead of OBOR – China Edits the English Name of its Most Ambitious International Project', *Latvian Institute of International Affairs*, 28 July 2016. In Chinese, the name of the initiative has not been changed.

84. Francesca Congiu, 'China 2015: Implementing the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXVI/2015, pp. 19-52. The literature on the OBOR/BRI is simply too extensive to be quoted here with any exhaustiveness. For a recent and very perceptive contribution see Mark Beeson & Corey Crawford, 'Putting the BRI in Perspective: History, Hegemony and Geo-economics', *Chinese Political Science Review*, February 2022 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-022-00210-y>).

85. The best treatment of the origin of the Kashmir issue remains Victoria Schofield, *Kashmir in Conflict. India, Pakistan and the Unfinished War*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2000, chapters 2 and 3.

that the project would grant to Pakistan, a nation which New Delhi regarded as its direct adversary in South Asia.⁸⁶

At that point, India's opposition not only to the CEPC but to the whole BRI became unremitting. China's successive offers to India to join the BRI, which would have resulted in massive injections of Chinese capital in the Indian economy and allowed New Delhi to remedy India's dramatic shortcomings in its infrastructure sector were all turned down.

India's all-out opposition to the BRI was highlighted by its decision not to join the two-day BRI forum held in Beijing on 14-15 May 2017, India being one of the very few Asian countries which made this choice.⁸⁷ India's absence at the BRI forum was closely followed by the launching in Gandhinagar (Gujarat) of the Japan-India jointly sponsored Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). The AAGC was technically similar to the BRI and focused on geographical areas overlapping those involved in the Chinese initiative. Although, to a large extent, the AAGC did not generate any concrete results, India's will to challenge China at the economic level had become evident.⁸⁸

4.1.3. *Upping the ante: challenging China at Doklam*

The fact that India had now embarked in a proactive containment policy aimed at China was further highlighted on the occasion of the Doklam crisis in summer 2017. Doklam or Dong Lang is a territory disputed between Bhutan and China, clearly positioned north of the LAC, which, only in this sector – namely the central sector – has been clarified by the exchange of maps between China and India. India responded to the news that the Chinese People Liberation Army (PLA) had entered the area and was building a road by sending its own troops there, to prevent the PLA from continuing its work.

86. It is worth pointing out that the CPEC is supposed to go through Gilgit-Baltistan, namely an area that was only partly included in the principality of Kashmir, of which India is the heir. See, e.g., Adnan Aamir, 'India's opposition to CPEC on shaky ground', *Asia Times*, 1 April 2020. This, in itself, is an indication of the speciousness of India's official reason for opposing CPEC. On India's opposition to the CPEC, see: B.M. Jain, *South Asia Conundrum. The Great Power Gambit*, London: Lexington Books, 2019; Filippo Boni, 'India's responses to the Belt and Road Initiative: a case study of Indo-Pakistani relations', in Silvio Beretta, Giuseppe Iannini & Axel Berkofsky (eds), *India's Foreign and Security Policies. Friends, Foes and Enemies*.

87. 'Belt and Road Attendees List', *The Diplomat*, 12 May 2017. On the official reasons of India's absence, see 'Official Spokesperson's response to a query on participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum', *Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs*, 13 May 2017.

88. Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2017: Narendra Modi's continuing hegemony and his challenge to China', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXVIII/2017, p. 285.

India stated that its move had been made in consultation with the Royal Government of Bhutan. It is a fact, nonetheless, that Thimphu exhibited very little enthusiasm for New Delhi's intervention.⁸⁹

India's troops crossed the LAC and entered Doklam on 16 June 2017; a standoff followed, which ended only on 28 August 2017, when the troops of both countries left the area, bringing an end to China's attempt to build a road there.⁹⁰

This was seen as a major victory for India by many observers. India's victory, however, was limited: Chinese troops remained present on the reverse slope of Doklam Plateau.⁹¹ In the following months they went on building new infrastructures in that area, «slowly but steadily gaining advantage in the contested region».⁹² At the beginning of 2019, reports based on satellite images pointed out that China was deploying additional forces near the plateau and constructing paved areas for parking heavy vehicles. One of these hard-standings could possibly be a heliport.⁹³

If the military result of the Doklam standoff is disputed, its political significance is crystal-clear: the Doklam confrontation was the incontrovertible demonstration of India's willingness to oppose China also militarily.

4.2. *India's relations with the US from 2014 to the end of the Trump presidency*

While setting in place his containment/engagement China policy, Narendra Modi launched his US policy. This was initially focussed on getting the support of the US, but most particularly that of the US business community, in enhancing and accelerating India's economic development. During the remainder of the Obama presidency, namely up to 20 January 2017, this strategy, although not devoid of some results, was far from meeting the rosy expectations initially held by both the Indian Premier and the US business community. On the top of it, once Donald Trump succeeded Obama, the India-US economic connection became decidedly more difficult, as a result of the new president's «America First» policy, which eventually

89. *Ibid.*, pp. 287; Jeremy Luedi, 'Doklam Standoff Highlights India and China's «Great Game» over Bhutan', *Foreign Policy Association*, 11 September 2017; Joel Wuthnow, Satu Limaye & Nilanthi Samaranyake, 'Doklam, One Year Later: China's Long Game in the Himalayas', *War on the Rocks*, 7 June 2018.

90. Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2017: Narendra Modi's continuing hegemony and his challenge to China', pp. 285-288.

91. Col. Vinayak Bhat (ret'd), 'China has quietly altered its boundary with Bhutan after Doklam stand-off with India', *The Print*, 8 October 2018.

92. Joel Wuthnow, Satu Limaye & Nilanthi Samaranyake, 'Doklam, One Year Later: China's Long Game in the Himalayas'.

93. Col. Vinayak Bhat (ret'd.), 'Near Doklam, China is again increasing forces, building roads & even a possible heliport', *The Print*, 2 April, 2019.

resulted in a «mini trade-war».⁹⁴ These economic difficulties, however, appeared to be compensated by the enhancement of the India-US strategic connection. The result was that, in the years of the Trump presidency, the mainstay of the India-US connection decidedly shifted from being based on the economy to being grounded on an increasingly close strategic-military dimension.⁹⁵

4.2.1. *India's relations with the US from 2014 to the end of the Obama presidency*

US President Barack Obama, while unambiguously interested in promoting the economic connection with India, was as unambiguously decided to induce India to align itself more closely to the US strategy aimed to contain China. This resulted not only in the renewal, in June 2015, of the 10-year US-India defence framework, originally signed in 2005, but in enhanced US pressure on India to sign a series of three bilateral military pacts. These pacts, which Washington described as «foundational», would concretely flesh out the military cooperation envisaged in the US-India defence framework. They were the same pacts which the Manmohan Singh's government had avoided to ink, because of fears that they would result in the US capability to influence the functioning of the Indian armed forces.

Eventually, US pressure resulted in the signing, in April 2016, of the first – and the least controversial – of the three pacts: the Logistic Exchange Memorandum of Agreement or LEMOA.⁹⁶ Yet, still at the end of the Obama presidency, the other two «foundational» pacts remained unsigned.

4.2.2. *India's relations with the US during the Trump presidency*

In essence, as long as Obama was the US president, India's US policy under Modi changed less in its substance than in the rhetorical hype with which it was presented. The real change occurred as soon as Trump succeeded Obama: while the economic connection was put under pressure by Trump's «America First» approach, the strategic one rapidly became dominant.

94. Chad P. Bown, 'Trump's Mini-Trade War with India', *Peterson Institute for International Economics*, 8 July 2019

95. Michelguglielmo Torri, *India's US policy 1991-2014: the gradual loss of strategic autonomy*, Silvio Beretta, Giuseppe Iannini & Axel Berkofsky (eds), *India's Foreign and Security Policies. Friends, Foes and Enemies*.

96. The LEMOA gave «access, to both countries, to designated military facilities on either side for the purpose of refuelling and replenishment». 'What is LEMOA?', *The Hindu*, 30 August 2016. The agreement was advantageous for the US, particularly its navy and air force, which could make use of Indian facilities to control the Indian Ocean. What were the possible advantages for India remained a question mark. On the signing of the LEMOA, see Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2016: Reforming the Economy and Tightening the Connection with the US', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXVII/2016, pp. 341, 344.

On 26 January 2017, namely a few days after Trump's entry into the White House, there was a telephone conversation between Modi and the US President. In it, the Indian Premier and the US President decided to strengthen the US-India military cooperation «across the Indo-Pacific region».⁹⁷ This found expression in India's role in the resurrection of the Quad, namely a de facto anti-China alliance in progress whose most important member was the US, in the launching of a «2+2» US-India ministerial dialogue involving the respective foreign and defence ministers and, last but not least, in India finally inking the remaining two «foundational pacts», fleshing out India-US military cooperation.

4.2.2.1. *The resurrection of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue*

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or QSD, or Quad – officially an informal strategic forum including the US, India, Japan and Australia – had originally been launched in 2007. De facto, the Quad was an anti-China alliance in progress, whose military arm was represented by a greatly expanded Exercise Malabar. In 2007, in conjunction with the launching of the Quad, Exercise Malabar – which had been born in 1992 as an annual bilateral naval India-US exercise – was spectacularly expanded to include Australia, Japan and Singapore.⁹⁸

Not surprisingly, the launching of the Quad greatly alarmed China, which issued formal diplomatic protests to the Quad member states. The result was the Quad's sudden demise in 2008 and the reduction of Exercise Malabar to its original bilateral format. This is not the place for an in-depth analysis of the reasons of this development; it suffices to point out that New Delhi's decision was coherent with its 2005-2008 policy, discussed above, aimed at expanding the relation with the US while striving to prevent the relation with China from becoming openly conflictual.

That was the situation in 2007. Ten years later, the circumstances had changed. As a result, India took part in the resurrection of the Quad on 11 November 2017. As had been the case in 2007, the rather undefined finalities of the new Quad could not conceal its status as an alliance in progress, aimed at containing China. Even before the Quad's revival,

97. Deepal Jayasekera & Keith Jones, 'Amid India-China war crisis, Washington boosts strategic ties with New Delhi', *World Socialist Web Site*, 19 August 2017.

98. On Exercise Malabar see, e.g.: Gurpreet S. Khurana, 'Joint Naval Exercises: A Post-Malabar-2007 Appraisal for India', *IPCS Issue Brief*, No. 52, September 2007; Waqar-un-Nisa, 'Indo-US Naval Cooperation: Geo-Strategic Ramifications for the Region', *Policy Perspectives*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2019, pp. 41-59; Sumit Ganguly & M. Chris Mason, *An Unnatural Partnership? The Future of U.S.-India Strategic Cooperation*, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, May 2019. See also the two useful Exercise Malabar-related histograms included in Giulio Pugliese, 'Il Dialogo di Sicurezza Quadrilaterale nell'Indo-Pacifico (The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue in the Indo-Pacific)', *Osservatorio di Politica internazionale*, No. XVII, 2021, pp. 42, 43.

in 2016, Exercise Malabar had been expanded to include Japan. In the following years, the yearly naval exercises involving the three countries became increasingly massive, although without ever getting to the size reached in 2007.⁹⁹

4.2.2.2. *The «2+2» India-US dialogue and the signing of the «foundational pacts»*

India's march towards an ever closer and more structured US-centred anti-China alliance was however slowed down by two developments. One was that, rather unexpectedly, in the closing months of 2017, immediately after the end of the Doklam confrontation, China made a series of de-escalating moves towards India, aimed at trying to overcome her opposition to the BRI. In 2018, these moves dovetailed with the increasing difficulties inflicted on the India-US connection by Donald Trump's «America First» policy and resulted in a distinctive thaw in the India-China relationship, which was highlighted by the Modi-Xi meeting at Wuhan (27-28 April 2018).

The US countered this thawing in the India-China relations by promoting the «2+2» US-India dialogue and by opening the possibility for India to accede to high-technology US products, especially in the defence and civil space sectors.

The launching of the «2+2» ministerial dialogue had been decided during that same Trump-Modi telephone conversation of 26 January 2017 above alluded to, and its maiden meeting had been scheduled in May 2018. However, just after the Wuhan Modi-Xi meeting the US decided to put on hold the first session of the 2+2 dialogue. Washington, in order to reschedule the meeting, demanded New Delhi's assurance that it would sign at least the second «foundational» agreement. It was only when this assurance was given that the first «2+2» ministerial meeting was rescheduled on 6 September 2018.¹⁰⁰

The meeting, held in New Delhi, was accompanied by the signing of the second foundational agreement, the Communications Compatibility

99. On the history of the Quad, see Tanvi Madan, 'The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the «Quad»', *War on the Rocks*, 16 November 2017; Rahul Roy-Chaudhury & Kate Sullivan de Estrada, 'India, the Indo-Pacific and the Quad', *Survival*, Vol. 60, No. 3, June-July 2018, pp. 181-94; Kevin Rudd, 'The Convenient Rewriting of the History of the «Quad»', *Nikkei Asia*, 26 March 2019; Patrick Gerard Buchan & Benjamin Rimland, 'Defining the Diamond: The Past, Present, and Future of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue', *CSIS Briefs*, March 2020; Giulio Pugliese & Sebastian Maslow, 'Japan 2018: Fleshing out the «Free and Open Indo-Pacific» strategic vision', *Asia Maior* Vol. 29, 2019, pp. 101-128; Giulio Pugliese, 'Japan 2015: Confronting East Asia's Geopolitical Game of Go', *Asia Maior* vol. 26, 2015, pp. 93-132.

100. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2018: The resetting of New Delhi's foreign policy?', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXIX/2018, pp. 295-319.

and Security Agreement (COMCASA)¹⁰¹ and was preceded (on 3 August 2018) by the US granting Strategic Trade Authorization-1 (STA-1) status to India. This was a status that opened the possibility for India to buy previously forbidden high-technology, dual-use US products in the defence and civil space sectors. Significantly, only two other Asian countries, both close US allies, namely Japan and South Korea, had previously been admitted to enjoy the STA-1 status.

The granting of the STA-1 status, the signing of the second foundational pact and the start of the «2+2» dialogue were expected to result in a major increase in India's purchase of state-of-the-art high-technology weapons and weapon systems. More importantly, these three developments, which took place in the short span of time of some five weeks, brought the US-India strategic connection to a new, higher and closer level.

Up to the time in which these lines are written (November 2021), the first 2+2 dialogue has been followed by two further sessions: the first in Washington, on 18 December 2019, and the second in Delhi, on 27 October 2020. The 18 December 2019 session was preceded and accompanied by the signing of a set of agreements enhancing security and defence cooperation between the two countries; in particular, the 27 October 2020 session saw the signing of third and final foundational agreement, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for geo-spatial co-ordination, or BECA.¹⁰² Summing up, by the close of the Trump presidency there was little doubt that a de facto military alliance in all but name had been forged

101. COMCASA aimed at facilitating interoperability between US's and India's militaries by supplying the latter with transfer-specialised equipment for encrypted communications for US origin military platforms like the C-17, C-130 and P-8Is. See 'What is COMCASA?', *The Hindu*, 6 September 2018. The problem with COMCASA was that it opened the possibility that the US could illegitimately acquire highly confidential data on the working of India's defence and intelligence apparatuses both thanks to the possibility for the US, included in the COMCASA, to carry out intrusive inspections in India's apparatuses or by Trojan horses included in the US-supplied equipment. See Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2018: The resetting of New Delhi's foreign policy?', pp. 306-307. For a detailed analysis of the potential risks for India's defence apparatuses caused by joining COMCASA see Pravin Sawhney, 'Why India's Latest Defence Agreement with the United States May Prove a Costly Bargain', *The Wire*, 27 October 2020.

102. BECA allowed India to use US geospatial intelligence and enhance accuracy of automated systems and weapons like missiles and armed drones. It gave access to topographical and aeronautical data and advanced products aimed at aiding navigation and targeting. It also allowed sharing of high-end satellite images, telephone intercepts, and data exchange on Chinese troops and weapons deployment along the LAC. '2+2 dialogue: India, US sign crucial agreement on geo-spatial intelligence', *The Indian Express*, 27 October 2020. See also 'Explained: BECA, and the importance of 3 foundational pacts of India-US defence cooperation', *The Indian Express*, 3 November 2020. Of course, the problem with BECA was that it made the Indian military heavily dependent upon US-supplied information, whose trustworthiness could not be verified.

between India and the US. Likewise, there is little doubt that this alliance was aimed against China.

4.3. *The India-China crisis of 2020*

Already at the time of the second session of the 2+2 dialogue, namely at the end of 2019, it became clear that a de facto anti-China military alliance between the US and India was taking shape.¹⁰³ Also, that same year, there was another development in India which, although apparently of domestic relevance only, could not fail to arouse concern in Beijing. This was the dismantling of the Jammu & Kashmir state, and the assumption of direct management of that area on the part of the Indian central government through the creation of two union territories: the union territory of Jammu & Kashmir and the union territory of Ladakh.

Even when an Indian union territory has an elected legislative assembly, the final power is not in the hands of the chief minister, expression of the majority in the legislative assembly, but of the lieutenant governor. The latter is an official formally chosen by the president of India, which means that the governor is an appointee of the central government, to which he or she is responsible and on behalf of which he or she acts. In the case of the newly created union territory of Ladakh, the governor's powers were not even affected by the presence of a legislative assembly elected by the local population, as Ladakh was a union territory without a legislative assembly.

By itself, the decision to dismantle the J&K state and to put in its place two union territories was seen in Beijing as a potentially threatening move. In fact, Beijing read New Delhi's decision less as aimed against India's Muslim minority – which indeed it was¹⁰⁴ – than as proof of the Modi government's decision to control more closely the border situation. In turn, this was read as prodromic to potentially confront China in the Aksai Chin region, as New Delhi had done at Doklam two years before. This was a pre-occupation which could not but be strengthened by two declarations made in the Indian Parliament by Home Minister Amit Shah, namely the number two in the Modi government. Shah stated (on 19 November and 3 December 2019) that the whole of previous princely state of Kashmir was «an inseparable part of India». Accordingly, both the so called POK (Pakistan Occupied Kashmir) and Aksai Chin, namely the Himalayan territory under

103. As argued by former Indian ambassador M. K. Bhadrakumar in an article written in December 2019: « The US-Indian military-to-military ties are deepening and the two countries are tiptoeing toward a veritable alliance in the Indo-Pacific region». M. K. Bhadrakumar, 'US-India: Why 2+2 may not always be 4', *Indian Punchline*, 22 December 2019.

104. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy; building a kingdom of cruelty and fear', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX/2019, pp. 352-365.

Chinese control at least from the early 1960s, were Indian and, in Shah's words, worth dying for.¹⁰⁵

In the final analysis, at the end of 2019, not only an India-US military alliance was taking shape, but India's second most powerful politician had openly claimed a territory including the whole of China-held Aksai Chin, and stated that, if necessary, it should be reclaimed by the use of force. Strangely enough, this being the situation, the only apparent adversarial reaction on the part of Beijing was challenging India's decision to dismantle the J&K state at the United Nations, which, however, could not but result in diplomatic failure for China.¹⁰⁶

Still at the beginning of 2020, in spite of China's latest contestation of India's J&K policy at the UN (on 16 January), India-China relations seemed to continue on the positive trend started in 2018. In fact, no less than 70 events throughout the year had been announced to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the beginning of diplomatic relations between the two countries.¹⁰⁷

According to Yun Sun, director of the China Program at the Stimson Center, the persistence of this situation of apparent bonhomie was the result of China's reassessment of India's weight, caused by the Doklam confrontation. Sun, however, noticed that China remained «profoundly suspicious of India's strategic ambitions and intentions» and described its attitude towards India as characterized by «formal rapprochement on the surface versus distrust and hedging in private».¹⁰⁸

In fact, soon after the publication of Sun's analysis, China's underlying distrust towards India burst forth: the year that was supposed to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the beginning of diplomatic relations between the two countries saw the worst Sino-Indian border crisis since the 1987-88 confrontation.

The crisis took the form of a series of incidents and military moves along the LAC which started in May 2020 on the northern bank of the Pangong Lake (or Pangong Tso). In June 2020, a major incident took place in Ladakh's Galwan Valley: although no firearms were used, there was a «savagely fought» confrontation between Chinese and Indian militaries, which, for the first time since 1975, resulted in the loss of human lives.¹⁰⁹ The crisis

105. 'PoK, Aksai Chin part of J&K, we are ready to die for the region: Amit Shah', *Business Standard*, 22 November 2019; 'PoK, Aksai Chin part of J&K; will give life for it: Amit Shah in Lok Sabha', *Business Standard*, 5 December 2019.

106. 'UN Security Council discusses Kashmir, China urges India and Pakistan to ease tensions', *UN News*, 16 August 2019; 'China isolated on Kashmir issue at UNSC, 14 nations refuse discussion in big win for India', *India Today*, 16 January 2020.

107. Yun Sun, 'China's Strategic Assessment of India', *War on the Rocks*, 25 March 2020.

108. *Ibid.*

109. Sanjeev Miglani & Yew Lun Tian, 'India, China want peace but blame each other after deadly border clash', *Reuters*, 17 June 2020.

went on for months, led to the deployment of additional armed forces along the LAC, hedged on the brink of armed confrontation more than once, and finally uneasily winded down only in February 2021, with the mutual pull-back of troops from the area of major tension.

While no in-depth analysis will be offered here of this crisis,¹¹⁰ two elements are relevant to the discussion carried out in this article: the first is that, even if the hypothesis is made that the crisis started by chance, due to the different views of India and China on the positioning of the LAC, the confrontation was so harsh and prolonged in time that there is no doubt that its continuation was consciously pursued; the second relevant point to be made here is that, in pursuing the border confrontation, Beijing's aim appears to have been less the pursuit of what Indian military analysts define as «salami slicing tactics», namely nibbling away Indian territory, than putting pressure on New Delhi. In other words, the longest and most dangerous Sino-Indian border confrontation since 1988 was China's reaction to both the coming into being of India's de facto military alliance with Washington and Amit Shah's threatening claims on the whole of the former princely state of Kashmir, Aksai Chin included.

5. Conclusion

According to senior Indian journalist Prem Shankar Jha: «Since India's defeat in the 1962 war, successive Indian governments have stoked distrust and fear of the Chinese so assiduously and for so long that to even think of that country as anything but a relentlessly ambitious hegemonic power determined to encircle and politically strangle its only rival in Asia, has become something close to treason».¹¹¹ This statement is correct, as far as it goes. In fact, it must be supplemented in the light of the fact that a much more important role in feeding «a diet of half truths» about India's relationship with China, which have become a «serious impediments to peace»,¹¹² has continuously and consistently been played by nationalist journalists, media persons, analysts and intellectuals. In turn, most Western journalists and analysts investigating India-China relations have usually based their inquiries mainly on Indian sources, often embracing and absorbing their biases.

The fact that, with the beginning of this century, the US has started to feel its position as world hegemon increasingly threatened by the rise

110. For a detailed analysis of the crisis up to the closing of 2020, see Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2020: Confronting China, aligning with the US', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 378-389.

111. Prem Shankar Jha, 'Don't Blame Modi for «No Intrusion» Claim, Blame Him for Dramatic Shift in China Policy', *The Wire*, 26 June 2020.

112. *Ibid.*

of China has powerfully contributed to the crafting, by US politicians and intellectuals, of a powerful and widespread negative discourse about China. China's iniquitous and authoritarian social system, its ethnocidal treatment of its Uighur and Tibetan minorities, its crackdown in Hong Kong, its aggressiveness towards weaker neighbours, its allegedly neo-colonial policies in sub-Saharan Africa, and, last but certainly not least, its supposed attempt at world domination have been highlighted and sternly criticized. Given the enormous weight of the «soft power» still exercised by the US, this negative discourse has gradually become the «common wisdom» about China in the West and not only there.

This author has no hesitation in stressing that the anti-China discourse contains much more than a grain of truth. Nonetheless, he is convinced that the real reason for constructing and promoting it has very little to do with the promotion of democracy world-wide and everything to do with the defence of the US-dominated world order. In fact, much of the same accusations levelled against China could and should be made against a number of other nations; this, however, does not happen – or happens in a very limited way – because those nations are supporters of the present US-dominated world order. Also, the anti-China discourse nimbly avoids considering the fact that any nation has some legitimate interests that its political leadership – irrespective of whether it is democratic or authoritarian – cannot but pursue. Particularly in the West, justifying the attack against the legitimate political interests of a given nation on the basis that its political regime is authoritarian or, anyway, not democratic enough has been a much-utilized ideological weapon. While much appreciated by the public opinions of Western democracies, this ideology, when translated into policy, has usually left a trail of death and ruin in its wake, without even being able to achieve its proclaimed objective of remedying the lack of democracy in the states against which it is used.

Without elaborating further on the issue of democratic ideology being used as an ideological mask for power politics, what is relevant to highlight here is the fact that the US-sponsored anti-China discourse has nicely dovetailed with the one on the same topic previously manufactured by Indian intellectuals and politicians. The two views, accordingly, have fed on one another, mutually reinforcing and legitimising. Hence, the view – so widespread in the Western media – that China, in its dealing with India, has constantly behaved treacherously and aggressively, in an unmotivated attempt not only «to encircle and politically strangle» India, but to deceitfully nibble away at Indian national territory has come to be accepted as axiomatic. China's repeated attempts to negotiate with India have been read as part of a Machiavellian strategy aimed at deceiving India's policy-makers – who, before Modi's saving and providential advent, are usually depicted as gullible and weak. In fact, according to India's prevailing view, the aim of China's negotiations has only been aimed at buying time, while

creating facts on the ground and unrelenting pushing back India along the Himalayan border.

This article, however, by analysing the India-China and India-US relations since the beginning of the present century, has argued that another explanation is possible. In fact, China's India policy can be read as Beijing's symmetric response to New Delhi's becoming an increasingly important component of the Washington-built anti-China arc of containment in the Indo-Pacific.

A second and hardly less important point made in this article is that India's foreign policy, while characterised by the increasing closeness to the US since 2005, was nevertheless marked by a series of corrective strategies aimed at blunting its negative impact on China. On the whole these corrective strategies limited China reactions, even in the post 2008 period, when it is claimed that China's foreign policy became increasingly assertive. Things, however, took a turn for the worse when Narendra Modi assumed the political leadership of India in 2014. He discarded the cautions which had characterised his predecessor's China policy, tried to impose a sort of unrealistic India-China parity, and emphasised the strategic/military aspect of the US connection. It was a policy which, while winning great acclaim for his author in the Indian nationalist milieu and on the part of the increasing number of nations disturbed by China's rise, triggered, not surprisingly, an enhanced adversarial reaction on the part of Beijing.

