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China's Indian Provocations Part of Broader Trend

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Over the last few years, tensions have been brewing between India and China over their long-held border disputes. The source of the tensions is multifaceted but driven in large part by China's concern with an emergent India and Beijing's desire to consolidate its position on Tibet. While military conflict between the two Asian giants is unlikely any time soon, recent Chinese moves illustrate a broader trend of muscular diplomacy from Beijing over its various territorial claims.

In order to guard against a variety of threats, including a potentially hostile China, India will continue to pursue a robust military modernization program and closer diplomatic ties with other Asian nations. The U.S. should keep close tabs on the simmering Sino-Indian border friction and continue with plans to enhance U.S.–Indian defense cooperation, through coordinated maritime security programs, joint military exercises, and defense trade deals that assist India in accessing advanced military technology.

Unresolved Issues. While trade and economic ties between India and China are improving (bilateral trade has increased from around \$5 billion in 2002 to over \$60 billion in 2010), both sides continue to harbor deep suspicions of the other's strategic intentions. In recent years, China has increasingly pressured India over their disputed borders by questioning Indian sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh.

China lays claim to more than 34,000 square miles of this northeast Indian state and since 2007 has focused on building up its military infrastructure in areas close to the Arunachal Pradesh border,

as well as expanding a network of road, rail, and air links. India has sought to match the Chinese moves and to reinforce its own territorial claims by augmenting forces—including the raising of two mountain divisions and placing of two squadrons of Sukhoi-30 fighters near the state—and constructing several roads on its side of the border in Arunachal Pradesh.

The most recent flare-up between Beijing and New Delhi, however, involves Indian sovereignty over the state of Jammu and Kashmir. This is a particularly sensitive region for India since the state was wracked by a Pakistan-backed insurgency throughout the 1990s and has more recently erupted in violent riots led by anti-Indian Kashmiri youth. India and Pakistan have disputed the status of Jammu and Kashmir since partition in 1947 and fought two full-fledged wars and one brief border war in 1999 over the issue. During the 1962 Sino–Indian war, China invaded the eastern and western sectors of their shared borders and ended up annexing the area of Aksai Chin, which had been part of the pre-partition princely state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The current tussle developed late last month when Beijing refused to grant a visa to Indian Lieutenant General B. S. Jaswal, chief of Northern Command, which includes parts of Kashmir. General

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Jaswal had intended to travel to Beijing to participate in a high-level China–India defense exchange. It is unclear what prompted the latest visa incident, but it follows Chinese complaints about a meeting between the Indian Prime Minister and the Dalai Lama in mid-August. India is a long-term host to the Dalai Lama and about 100,000 Tibetan refugees, although the Indian government forbids them from participating in any political activity.

In response to China's refusal to grant General Jaswal a visa, India cancelled a visit by Chinese officers to India and postponed indefinitely any further defense exchanges with China. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh convened a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security last week to discuss the visa incident.

The meeting also likely included discussions of new claims of a Chinese troop presence in Pakistan's Northern Areas that abut the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir.¹ Most likely, these troops are construction battalions helping to build transportation links between Pakistan and the PRC, possibly from the Chinese-funded port facility at Gwadar.

Nonetheless, New Delhi would view with consternation the possibility of Chinese troops being stationed on both the eastern and western borders of Indian Kashmir. China already maintains a robust defense relationship with Pakistan, and the China–Pakistan partnership serves both Chinese and Pakistani interests by presenting India with a potential two-front theater in the event of war with either country.

China may be returning to a position of reflexively supporting Pakistan on Kashmir. Since the 1999 Kargil border conflict between India and Pakistan, Beijing's position on Kashmir seemed to be evolving toward a more neutral position. During that conflict, Beijing helped convince Pakistan to withdraw forces from the Indian side of the Line of

Control following its incursion into the Kargil region of Jammu and Kashmir. Beijing made clear its position that the two sides should resolve the Kashmir conflict through bilateral negotiations, not military force. Any Chinese backtracking from this neutral position on Kashmir would likely be met with subtle moves by India that increasingly question Chinese sovereignty over Tibet.

Pattern of Chinese Pressure. China's recent actions are increasing pressure on many of its neighbors. In April, Chinese naval forces engaged in exercises near the Ryukyu Islands. In August, Chinese naval forces conducted major naval exercises in the East China Sea and more recently have held live-fire exercises in the Yellow Sea (after protesting U.S.–South Korean military exercises in the same area).

More recently, the Chinese also planted a flag on the floor of the South China Sea to reinforce their claims to that entire area. Meanwhile, Chinese naval vessels made a port call in Burma, marking the first time Chinese naval combatants have called on that nation.²

China's growing assertiveness is supported by a range of increasingly sophisticated military capabilities. This year's report on Chinese military power from the U.S. Department of Defense highlights China's ever more effective air and naval forces, as well as ongoing investments in both space and cyber operations.

A concrete example of this growing set of capabilities was displayed in August, when China held its first major parachute exercise in the Tibetan plateau. This involved a paratroop drop of 600 troops, clearly establishing a rapid force insertion capability on the part of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).³ As a Chinese officer observed, this exercise showed that, in the event of a crisis, Chinese paratroopers could rapidly deploy at any time.

1. Selig Harrison, "China's Discreet Hold on Pakistan's Northern Borderlands," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2010, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/27/opinion/27iht-edharrison.html> (September 9, 2010).
2. Ben Arnoldy, "China Warships Dock in Burma, Rattling Rival Naval Power India," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 30, 2010, at <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2010/0830/China-warships-dock-in-Burma-rattling-rival-naval-power-India> (September 9, 2010).
3. *PLA Daily*, "PLA Engages in First Large-Scale Parachute Exercise in the Tibetan Plateau," August 13, 2010, at <http://www.tianshui.com.cn/news/junshi/2010081310330711550.htm> (September 9, 2010).

These modernization efforts are supported by investments in training and doctrine so that the PLA can put those new weapons to effective use. The paratroop drop is only one example of the current Chinese training tempo, which includes major joint exercises in the Jinan Military Region (which appears to be the PLA's test-bed military region for "test-driving" new operational concepts) and naval exercises ever farther from Chinese shores. Chinese media also reports that Chinese "third generation" fighters, deployed into the Chengdu Military Region since March, have recently flown with live ammunition in the skies above Tibet.⁴

U.S. Reaction. With regard to China's maneuvering in South Asia, the U.S. should:

- Continue to build strong strategic ties to India and encourage India to play a more active political and economic role in the region. To help India fulfill that role, Washington should continue to seek a robust military-to-military relationship with New Delhi and enhance defense trade ties.

- Collaborate more closely with India on initiatives that strengthen economic development and democratic trends in the region and work with India to counter any Chinese moves that could potentially undermine such trends in order to ensure the peaceful, democratic development of South Asia.
- Cooperate with India in matching increased Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean region. Given the substantial Indian naval capabilities, U.S. naval forces should increase their interaction with their Indian counterparts, both to improve Indian naval capabilities and to signal Beijing that its moves will be matched jointly by New Delhi and Washington.

Leadership Needed. With an ascendant China determined to flex its diplomatic and military muscle, American leadership is needed now more than ever.

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4. The Chinese refer to their Su-27/Su-30 fighters as "third generation" aircraft. The photographs accompanying this story are also of Su-27/Su-30 type aircraft. See Li Dengke, "PLA Third Generation Fighters Carry Live Ammunition Over High Plateaus for First Time in Course of Duties," *PLA Daily*, July 30, 2010, at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/micro-reading/china/2010-07-30/content_636626.html (September 9, 2010).