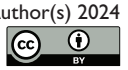
Research Article

The Sino-Indian Rivalry and Balance-of-power Theory: Explaining India's Underbalancing

Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs
11(4) 451–474, 2024



DOI: 10.1177/23477970241282065
journals.sagepub.com/home/aia

T. V. Paul[1]

Abstract

Balance-of-power theory has been challenged as insufficient for explaining state behaviour. Powerful anomalies for the theory exist, especially among states confronting intense rivalry and war. One such anomaly is underbalancing in the Sino-Indian rivalry by the Indian side up until 2017. Today India is still engaged in limited hard balancing, relying on asymmetrical arms build-up and strategic partnership with the United States and Japan that are not equal to military alignment. This article argues that India has occasionally engaged in hard balancing, relying on arms build-up and limited alliance formation, but in general, there has been a serious effort not to resort to intense hard balancing by forming military alliances or symmetrical arms build-up. This calls for an explanation. The core argument I make is that the type of balancing is intimately related to the type of rivalry states have. The China–India rivalry has yet to become an intense existential variety compared to the India–Pakistan rivalry where existential security and protection of national identity are of major concern. Indian elite's perceptions of the non-existential character of the Chinese threat and their reading of the Chinese strategy towards India have been the primary factors in explaining India's balancing response. In the latter, active hard balancing has been occurring both internally and externally, whereas the former is characterised by a combination of limited hard balancing, soft-balancing and diplomatic engagement, components of a hedging strategy. The hard balancing has picked up momentum since 2017 in response to a more assertive strategy of the Xi Jinping regime as the Chinese government has ratcheted up military activity on the India–China border. The general implication is that rivals who do not fear existential threats need not engage in intense hard balancing. Perceptions of the threat level play a bigger role in what kind of balancing behaviour occurs in international politics than acknowledged in standard theories on balance of power, especially of the automatic balancing variety.

Keywords

India, China, Sino-India, balance of power

[1] Department of Political Science, McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada

Corresponding author:
T. V. Paul, Department of Political Science, McGill University, Montreal, QC H3A 2T7, Canada.
E-mail: t.paul@mcgill.ca

Introduction

Balance of power has been a cardinal theory in international relations and perhaps one of its oldest, predating the discipline itself. It is the foundation of foreign policy behaviour in the historical European great power system as well as the IR theory of realism, both classical and neorealist versions (Kaufman et al., 2007; Kissinger, 1995; Little, 2007; Sheehan, 1996). One of the recurring themes in this context has been whether balance of power occurs automatically in the face of power disequilibrium or it needs to be created manually (Elman, 2003; Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 13; Waltz, 1979, p. 127). The former assumes that whenever a major imbalance occurs, weaker states flock together among themselves or with a stronger power so as to protect their sovereignty and security (Waltz, 1979, p. 127). However, it has been challenged as an insufficient theoretical and policy mechanism for explaining state behaviour, especially among those confronting rivalry and war. Powerful anomalies exist challenging the theory, its core premises, and its universal application. For instance, in the post-Cold War era, the United States emerged as the most powerful state, but no hard-balancing coalition was formed against it to balance its power position or its aggressive policies, especially in the Middle East. Only occasional soft-balancing coalitions appeared (Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005; Paul et al., 2004; Walt, 2005, 126–132; Wivel & Paul, 2020). This anomaly has continued to some extent with respect to the rise of China. A powerful balancing coalition is yet to form against China's increasing power and aggressive behaviour on several fronts. China's expansive territorial claims against a number of states, especially through its island-building activity in the South China Sea and periodic clashes with regional states, are cases in point. One such instance of underbalancing is India's balancing behaviour towards China. Underbalancing in the automatic balancing perspective means whenever an imbalance occurs in the power capabilities of two contending states or coalitions the weaker side would either fail to balance internally by acquiring matching weapon systems or externally by aligning with other powers, especially a great power. Balancing occurs against powerful states as without an equilibrium, the strong can turn on the weak anytime as intentions can change along with the increases in capabilities. Balancing in the automatic variety, should occur naturally as otherwise, the strong can dominate or challenge the security and sovereignty of the weaker party (Waltz, 1979, pp. 126–128). States, in the classical world of balance of power, ever mindful of survival, tend to seek power parity without which they could be the victims of aggression. The strong would not start a war as it is unlikely to win such a conflict without military preponderance.

This article argues that during the past seven decades of their existence as modern states, India has infrequently engaged in forceful hard balancing, that is, relying on military alliances and intense arms build-ups, but both countries have made serious efforts not to resort to such behaviour against each other even when the conditions were ripe for that. This has gradually changed since the arrival of Xi Jinping, as India under Narendra Modi appears to have resorted to increased military build-up, border military infrastructure development and the formation of

a limited hard-balancing coalition with the United States which is yet to become a full-fledged hard-balancing coalition. The puzzle is that the weaker party, that is, India, with its own great power ambitions and notions of status equivalency, has not been actively hard balancing against China, despite Beijing's frequent challenges to India's territorial security and status ambitions. I term this a case of 'limited hard balancing' as it is asymmetrical and not fully sufficient to face the threat posed by China if it resorts to a full-scale invasion as it did in 1962. If we go by the premises of automatic balance-of-power theory India should have balanced more intensely. As the 1962 attack shows, a stronger China engaged in military aggression to 'teach a lesson' against a weaker India, a key premise of balance of power logic, and yet India has not consistently balanced against China. This calls for an explanation.

The core argument I make is that hard balancing, relying on formal military alliances and intense military build-ups, is one of the strategies states in a rivalry can pursue and it is not automatic in the face of power discrepancy as structural realists such as Kenneth Waltz have contended. The Sino-Indian case study shows that agency, by way of elite perceptions of the threat level, has a major role to play in how balancing shapes in a rivalry. Periods when intense balancing was a possibility, both sides reactivated diplomatic mechanisms to avert it. The type of balancing is intimately related to the type of rivalry states engage in and the threat level they perceive from each other. States in existential rivalries tend to pursue intense hard balancing, whereas in partial, managed rivalries, states can resort to soft-balancing and limited hard-balancing behaviour. Existential rivalries involve zero-sum competition and intense perceptions of challenges to the physical survival as well as the core identity of the state. In this Hobbesian world, opponents could fear unlimited use of force and elimination as a state or its core identity by the opponent. Opportunity and willingness to exploit windows of vulnerability are most feared by the adversarial states. Although the balance of threat theory of Stephen Walt has identified perception of threat towards a power with offensive capabilities and offensive intentions as the key variables in balancing outcomes, his and other relevant works have not yet focussed on the type of threat that matters the most. In this article, I identify 'existential threat in a rivalry' as a key variable that determines the balancing responses of states and thereby gives this factor more substance within the balance of threat theory. Balancing choices evolve as and when threat perceptions change in accordance with the perceived intensity of threats. When the perceived threat level is 'non-existential' states could pursue low-level balancing strategies such as soft-balancing and limited hard balancing.[1]

Soft-balancing relies on diplomatic ententes and institutional mechanisms to restrain a threatening power. There is no formal military alignment or automatic come-to-the-rescue clauses like Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Limited hard balancing involves some coordinated military activity short of formal alliances. It can also involve asymmetrical arms build-ups. Proper hard balancing occurs when states acquire equivalent capabilities vis-à-vis their adversaries sufficient to deter and defend either internally or in collaboration with an external ally (Pape, 2005; Paul, 2018b, pp. 20–22). Until now, the China–India rivalry has not become an intense existential variety compared to the

India–Pakistan rivalry where existential security is a major concern for both states, especially the weaker party, Pakistan. In the India–Pakistan case, active hard balancing has been occurring both in terms of internal and external balancing since the 1950s. Whereas in the former, balancing has been of limited hard balancing along with soft-balancing and diplomatic engagement, the three components of a hedging strategy (Paul, 2014). Intense hard balancing may materialise in the India–China relationship if Beijing becomes an existential threat to India or vice versa. In 2023, the chances of this appeared to be increasing in response to Xi Jinping's aggressive expansionist policies towards India and a number of Asian states (Ganguly et al., 2023). China's territorial incursions against India, active military build-up on the frontier areas, expansion of naval power to the Indian Ocean, deep economic and infrastructure involvement among smaller South Asian states and the challenge to India's great power aspirations all constitute an increase in threat level closer to existential threat, but not quite equal yet.

Explaining the Underbalancing Behaviour

The peculiar behaviour of India in avoiding intense hard balancing suggests that states confronted with power discrepancies can adopt different strategies to manage their rivalry and competition. Hard balancing is not automatic in the face of increasing power discrepancy among states with rivalries. Leaders can consider diplomacy and deliberate avoidance of hard balancing competition to preclude entrapment into an intense security dilemma situation. The presence of existential threats can increase military balancing, but the threat need not be perceived by all influential domestic actors in the same way. Limited hard balancing and economic collaboration can take place at the same time and the effects of the latter can be reduced by increased economic interdependence. However, simple economic interdependence, especially characterised by asymmetry and without strong societal-level interconnections, will not prevent occasional flare-ups of territorial disputes emerging and parties viewing territorial concessions as hard to make.

Existing Explanations for Underbalancing

The scholarly work on China–India rivalry and the absence of intense hard balancing is focused on domestic politics, economic incentives of cooperation, geography serving as a barrier and thereby reducing the threat level, nuclear deterrence, and the value China sees in having India as a partner to confront the Western dominance. A domestic politics explanation suggests that the Chinese Communist Party seeks to focus on domestic regime security and legitimacy which creates an incentive not to project India as a military threat (Mastro, 2019). On the Indian side also, although the China threat appears periodically, there is no strong domestic constituency to pressure an escalatory hard-balancing posture. Other explanations suggest that economic interdependence has a major effect on reducing the conflict. The challenge here is to show why no serious hard

balancing occurred even when economic interdependence did not exist, i.e., during the period before 2010. Moreover, this is not a symmetrical interdependence as India has a substantial disadvantage in the trade balance with China. In 2022, the total trade volume was $135.98 billion with China's exports accounting to $118.5 and India's exports, $17.48 billion, registering a $101.02 billion deficit for India. The interdependence factor is not that high for China as trade with India constitutes just 3.4% of Beijing's overall trade although it constitutes 14% of India's imports (*The Economic Times*, 2023; *The Hindu*, 2023).

The geographic barrier of the Himalayas, especially the rugged terrain is another factor claimed to be reducing the level of threat from each other (Garver, 2001, pp. 22–24). Going by this perspective, the improving infrastructure, especially the road connectivity for both sides to bring in troops speedily as well as the increased competition in the Indian Ocean could present opportunities for the threat level to increase and hard balancing to occur.[2] Some Chinese scholars have argued that Beijing has an incentive to keep India as a strategic partner as both are rising developing countries facing big power politics (Bole, 2005). This explains partially China's strategic approach towards India during the pre-Xi era. The China–India cooperation under the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) grouping as well as G-20 seems to be declining since Xi Jinping took power in 2012. Nuclear deterrence and the no-first-use policies of both sides have also been attributed partially to the stability of India's lack of a major conventional balancing (Basrur, 2021; Paul, 2018a). These explanations offer something on the larger puzzle, but an overarching account would require examining the type of rivalry, that is, existential versus ordinary, and the threat perceptions more concretely.

The larger theoretical literature on underbalancing is also relevant here. For instance, Randall Schweller contends that states underbalance because of domestic politics reason especially if they are ruled by elites in 'incoherent' 'fragmented states' (Schweller, 2008) which has some relevance to the Indian case. To Schweller, states can fail to recognise major threats to security as they are severely constrained by domestic factors. Rajesh Basrur's argument that Indian foreign policy is often bedevilled by serious policy drifts characterised by hesitation could be attributed to this case as well (Basrur, 2023). Diehl (2018) contends that the India–China relationship is a case of 'interrupted rivalry', and he attributes this to the confidence-building mechanisms that exist and the economic relationship which both sides want to preserve. The rivalry could reignite into intense form in the future due to domestic changes or the entrance of other domains like technological competition such as cyber. I contend these alternative explanations are yet to offer a powerful account for the fundamental cause of underbalancing in the India–China dyad. Despite the incoherent Indian policy, there has been a common thread in building cooperative relationship with China during the all Congress-led governments of Rajiv Gandhi, Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh. The Vajpayee government also continued the same policy approach. In fact, the early Modi period was also characterised by efforts at cooperation. However, it was Xi Jinping's arrival and his ambitious global strategy, including one towards India that propelled the current move towards higher levels of hard balancing by India.

The Chinese strategy is increasingly challenging India's existential security as well as identity conceptions as a rising great power. The Chinese perceive India's balancing with the United States as an existential challenge to its aspirations for a global power status and predominant power in the Indo-Pacific. Yet, these perceptions are yet to emerge as powerful enough for a full-fledged balancing behaviour as many mitigating factors such as strong economic relationship do reduce the perceptions of existential threat.

Existential Rivalry and Balancing Behaviour

The key reason why the Sino-Indian rivalry has not developed into a full-blown balance of power competition by India is the absence of an existential rivalry as perceived by the Indian elite but the presence of a limited, managed rivalry. Despite the active border dispute and conflict over status and resources, including water, the rivalry is yet to become an existential challenge to each other. But since the arrival of Xi this has changed moderately and this is reflected in India's increasing balancing efforts both internally and externally. By 'existential threat', I mean the opponent is viewed as threatening the physical existence as well as core identity as a nation-state, built around ethnic, religious or ideological grounds. Hobbesian worldview prevails in such a relationship. As Alexander Wendt characterises it, the Hobbesian states view each other as enemies who do not 'recognise the right of the self to exist as an autonomous being, and therefore will not willingly limit its violence towards the self'. The notion of 'deep revisionism' and fear of unlimited violence is prevalent in such a relationship. Rivals in 'shallow revisionism' …. 'seek to revise only its behaviour or property' and 'violence between rivals, in contrast, is self-limiting, constrained by each other's right to exist' (Wendt, 1999, pp. 260–261). An existential rivalry is different from a non-existential rivalry in terms of intentions and scope. When a rival is posing existential threat, it seeks to undermine the opponent's physical existence as well as core national identity if an opportunity arises. The fear level is very high in these rivalries and often they are characterised by zero-sum attitudes, that is, one's gain is a loss for the other in most strategic domains. A non-existential rivalry tends to be issue-specific—such as a dispute over a piece of territory or ideological competition, in which states do not challenge the existence of the other as a national entity. These are also in general, non-zero-sum conflicts. The India–China rivalry is of the latter type, albeit changing slowly, whereas in the India–Pakistan rivalry fears of deep revisionism pervades.

Even if it is exaggerated, the notion of a hegemonic India absorbing or bifurcating Pakistan has been crucial for Islamabad's hyper-national security behaviour, including hard balancing, right from the beginning. This perception has worsened since the liberation of Bangladesh by India in 1971. India too has an existential concern with Pakistan as the violent partition in 1947 on religious grounds is still reverberating in the Indian psyche. Pakistan's balancing behaviour, including alliances and arms acquisitions, and in recent years, nuclear weapons, have been viewed with an extreme sense of hostility in India. Pakistan's

support for insurgent activity in Kashmir is viewed as challenging India's unity and territorial integrity. Moreover, Pakistan has abetted terrorism in India and the Pakistani-sponsored attacks on the Indian parliament in 2001 and in Mumbai in 2008 have been viewed as challenges to India's core identity. The deep-rooted religious identity of Pakistan and the democratic/secular identity of India have encouraged each other to view in mortal enmity terms, and the increasing power of Hindutva in India has worsened the sense of identity conflict with Pakistan. Fears of deep revisionism exist on both sides, more so on the weaker Pakistan. Kashmir is viewed as a symbolic territory for both nation-states and revisions to its status by India are viewed as challenging deep-rooted national identity of Pakistan. Although China defeated India in the 1962 war, it withdrew from the forward positions it occupied in the Indian territory in the Northeast and status quo ante was re-established. India since then has attempted limited hard balancing with asymmetrical military and infrastructure build-up, much more tepidly than one would expect. More interestingly, India under Nehru resisted the urge to form a military alliance with the United States and the United Kingdom despite a humiliating defeat in the hands of the Chinese communist regime which he had cultivated through a friendship strategy. The tepid balancing towards China since then shows that India does not yet fear a similar existential challenge from China.

Two general propositions arise from this discussion. First, rivals who do not fear existential threats need not engage in intense hard balancing and may resort to lower levels of policies of soft balancing and other restraint mechanisms. Second, states in competition could develop trade and cooperative mechanisms to assuage the impact of conflict and can develop interdependence, negating the need for intense had balancing. The two propositions are linked. Trade and economic relations can assuage fears of war to some extent, even though the asymmetrical economic interdependence does not prevent periodic limited crises as in the India–China border context. However the fact that both sides inclined not to escalate periodic border skirmishes beyond a point suggests that the conflict is a 'managed rivalry' (Paul, 2018a). This offers a general conclusion that agency plays a bigger role in determining what kind of balancing behaviour occurs in international politics than acknowledged in standard structural theories on balance of power.

The changing ambitions of China under Xi Jinping and India's hopes to become a rising power of significance can produce intense hard-balancing behaviour in the future as existential fears could engender the need for a balancing coalition, especially on India's side. In fact, there is also some sign of this happening. India's increasing strategic relationship with the United States is a limited hard-balancing partnership, not yet a full-fledged balance-of-power coalition. An alliance akin to the United States–Japan or United States–Australia is necessary as the parties will come to support under treaty obligations. Lesser partnerships are limited hard-balancing instruments and that too, depending on the extent of the coordination among the parties. India forming a full-fledged hard-balancing coalition with the United States could propel China to do the same with possible partners like Russia and regional power Pakistan as the coalition could endanger China's hopes for obtaining superpower status in the twenty-first century. China's national identity

existence is increasingly tied to the notion of replacing the United States as the most powerful country before the middle of the century. India's identity is yet to emerge as a great power and if and when India develops that identity and views China as its core challenger, balance of power of the hard-balancing variety could develop. The perceived threat level will determine the extent of balancing propensity in this dyad. In this respect, the ball is on the bigger China not to pressure India too much or to humiliate it in a border conflict or encircle it with a naval force in the Indian Ocean which would force New Delhi to form a hard-balancing coalition with the United States and other likeminded states in the Indo-Pacific.

Balancing Against Threats

It was Stephen Walt who argued that balancing against threat is more likely than balancing against power capabilities. He argues: 'states facing an external threat will align with others to oppose the states posing the threat'. Offensive capability of the opponent is another cause of Walt's theory as he argues: 'The greater a state's offensive capabilities, the greater the tendency for others to align against it' (Walt, 1990, p. 32). Walt also brings forth geographic proximity, offensive power and aggressive intentions as other motivations for balancing behaviour (Walt, 1990, pp. 22–25). Yet, Walt does not delineate the kinds of threats that can elicit balancing. I draw from his theory but elucidate further the threat level that is required for intense hard balancing to occur. Two categories of threat can be identified: first existential threat and second, non-existential threat. As discussed previously, existential threat assumes the destruction of the adversary as well as its identity if and when an opportunity arises. Non-existential rivalry can cause war but are fought for goals such as limited territorial gains. Sometimes, elites can perceive each other's intentions maliciously and can attribute existential challenges in intentions. But perceptions of threat can change along with leadership changes and threatening behaviour on the border or elsewhere such as the sphere of influence of a power.

India's Underbalancing Behaviour

India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru attempted his maximum efforts to avoid an intense balance of power competition with China. He was unwilling to concede territory even when militarily India was very weak and yet he did not engage in the necessary level of arms build-up for a proper internal hard-balancing strategy. His expectation was that India and China were civilisational partners that faced colonialism almost simultaneously and can therefore bargain hard on contested territory without provoking war. At least until 1959, the military threat was not felt intensely in India. As Manjeet Pardesi argues, this was largely due to the reason that even after China's annexation of Tibet in 1949/1950, it was not the People's Liberation Army (PLA) but the Tibetan army that was guarding Tibet's frontiers with India. Moreover, until that period, the Indian rupee was allowed to

circulate relatively freely in Tibet. India also had its paramilitary constabulary guarding the Indo-Tibetan border, not the Indian Army (Pardesi, 2019b, p. 272). In his 18 November 1950 response to Sardar Patel's complaint that India has abandoned Tibet, Nehru stated: 'our major possible enemy is Pakistan' and 'that it is exceedingly unlikely that we may have to face any real military invasion from the Chinese side, whether in peace or in war, in the foreseeable future' (Das, 1974, pp. 335–341). Nehru also thought that the global correlation of forces would stop China from a major attack as this would translate into a world war with the United States and UK and perhaps the Soviets being drawn in.[3] During the 1950s, China as a newly emerging state from colonial yoke was not viewed by the Indian leadership as an existential identity threat as both faced a common enemy of Western imperialism.[4] It appears that Nehru also discounted the threat Communism could pose to India's democratic national identity as well as national integration. Relations worsened in the wake of Dalai Lama's fleeing to India and New Delhi giving asylum to Tibetan refugees in April 1959. It was also possible Nehru viewed the capabilities of China were not sufficient to challenge India massively on the border and that the correlation of global forces including Russian, American and British power could deter China (Bajpai, 2021, pp. 104–105), which proved to be a major misperception in the end.

This attitude of a non-existential, non-imminent threat seemed to have pervaded Indian elites', especially Nehru's thinking even during the crisis preceding the 1962 war. Yet, no alliance formation with a great power in the face of imminent war or during the war in 1962 took place. Nehru did make frantic efforts to obtain Western military support which began to flow in to India by 2 November 1962, when some eight US flights a day were flying into Calcutta which was followed by British supplies (Riedel, 2015, p. 121). On 19 November 1962, when the total military collapse seemed a possibility, Nehru sought massive American help and participation of US forces to fight the PLA (Riedel, 2015, p. 136). The Chinese declaration of unilateral ceasefire on November 20 helped to ease the speed of US deliveries, but a defence agreement was signed with the United States which allowed U-2 spy planes to monitor Chinese activities from Indian posts (cited in Kennedy, 2015, p. 98). A limited hard-balancing effort took place during this period, but it did not mature into a long-standing hard-balancing coalition. Nehru abandoned any notion of an alliance with the United States to face the threat immediately after the war ended as the Chinese retreated to the previous positions they had held in the Northeast sector, although they kept the Aksai Chin region in the northwest. During this period, the United States had a military alliance relationship with Pakistan which prevented further assistance for India and as some argue, the United States was also using the opportunity to force India to make concessions on Kashmir to Pakistan. Washington was reluctant to send any heavy weaponry to India that could be used against Pakistan. Instead, the supply consisted of light arms, ammunition and equipment for communications that were useful for mountain warfare.[5] The reluctance of Nehru for a tightened alliance with the United States was partially due to the concern of abandoning non-alignment as well as the possibility of the USSR siding with China. His larger effort had always been not to get entangled in the superpower balance of power politics and accentuate the threat level. The perceptions of the Chinese

military threat receded as a result of the PLA's withdrawing from the eastern front and retaining the status quo ante there even when China could have advanced further and kept what they had conquered.

Nehru's lack of adequate military build-up in the period preceding the war, that is, internal balancing, is also a puzzle. For 15 years following independence, Indian defence expenditure was around 1.8% of the GDP, hitting as low as 1.54 in 1960.[6] A strategy of forward deployments without adequate border security forces is still a challenge for explanation, although some analysts calls this due to misperceptions.[7] But Nehru was trying to avoid balance of power competition and an arms race as these he thought would hurt India's developmental priorities, showing that agency has a choice when facing security threats whether to balance or remain neutral. Nehru could not envision China as constituting an existential threat to India. His notion of 'Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai' (Indians and Chinese are brothers) and 'panchsheel' (five principles of peaceful co-existence) were built around the idea that India and China both had suffered under Western colonialism and that they could form a united front against new forms of imperial domination of Asia. The perception of threat was of a low-key nature during much of the 1950s and early 1960s until the war occurs.

Similarly, Nehru's unwillingness to develop a nuclear weapons capability despite evidence of China acquiring such a force is also a challenge to balance-of-power theory of the automatic variety. He was assured by the key figure of India's nuclear energy development and his close confidant, Dr Homi Bhabha, that

> the nuclear test by China will be of no military significance, and even the possession of a few bombs will not make any difference to the military situation, since, if China were to use one against any neighbouring country, it would, I am sure, call forth very strong action from the Western side, and in particular the United States. In the event of such action precipitated by an aggressive act by China, I do not think that even the Soviet Union would come to China's aid and precipitate a global war, in which it itself would suffer severe destruction. (Wilson Center Digital Archive, 1963)

Nehru even did not accept a US offer to hold China' seat in the UN Security Council. This was viewed as an unnecessary move as Nehru believed that China needed to be recognised as a great power and a thoroughly dissatisfied China would become a challenge to international order and peace (Roy, 2018). The 1963 China–Pakistan quasi-alliance and Pakistan ceding portions of Kashmir to China did cause concerns in India, but there is little evidence that it was viewed as a major threatening coalition that warranted a counter-coalition. At least it took another eight years for India to form a quasi-alliance with the USSR, that too only when faced with a war with Pakistan over the crisis in East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh) in 1971 and prior to that the United States forming a quasi-alliance partnership with China and Pakistan under the Nixon–Kissinger team. Subsequently, the India-Soviet quasi-alliance would weaken and became dysfunctional in the 1980s.[8] The Indian elite during Nehru's period, viewed India as a co-equal power in Asia with China and assumed the rest of the world accorded it this status.[9] Yet, in military capability acquisition, the effort was to underplay the requirements of hard balancing and status equivalency. Power was not met by power as automatic balance-of-power theory assumes.

Nehru's successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri increased defence spending and acquired a substantial number of conventional weapons from abroad. Indian policy still veered around the notion of slight edge against Pakistan but 'has for the most part followed a policy of sufficient defense, which itself has varied from little or no defense (as towards China in the 1950s) to minimum defense' (Thomas, 1986, p. 17). Defence spending went up and during 1963–1964 India's defence expenditure stood at ₹816 crores (around $1.71 billion), an increase of 72% from the 1962–1963 period when it was ₹474 crores (around $995 million), which itself was a jump of over 50% from the previous year. The ₹5,000 crores (around $10.5 billion) five-year defence modernisation announced in April 1964 envisaged an army of 825,000 personnel including 10 mountain divisions, and an air force with 45 squadrons. Weapons such as MiG-21 aircraft and T-55 tanks from the Soviet Union, Leander class frigates from Britain, artillery from the United States were purchased. The programme, also called for the establishment of a major indigenous arms industry, costing some ₹500 crores (over US$1 billion); and the construction and improvement of border communication facilities. By 1963–1964, Indian defence expenditure had risen from the 1960 level of 2.1% of the GNP to 4.5%. In real terms, this was ₹312 crores ($655 million) to ₹816 crores ($1.714 billion).[10] These acquisitions were also driven largely by Pakistan obtaining qualitatively superior weaponry, in particular aircraft and tanks from the United States.

Although the increases were substantial for a weak economy like India's, this was still asymmetrical and motivated by partial hard balancing towards China and Pakistan. It was also in response to the Pakistani successes in gaining superior quality weapons from the United States. However, Shastri faced intense domestic pressure to acquire nuclear weapons in response to China's nuclear testing in 1964. In fact, the Indian parliament saw some intense debate on the need for nuclear weapons to balance China, especially following the 1965 war with Pakistan. Yet, Shastri did not make a direct effort to sanction a nuclear programme. This is a good example of a case where automatic balancing should have occurred. Yet, Shastri avoided nuclear weapons development by arguing that global nuclear disarmament was the answer to China's bomb and that the costs of the weapons development in terms of material and moral dimensions precluded India developing it at that time. Shastri supported the plans proposed by his scientists for civilian nuclear development including peaceful nuclear tests in the future. The Chinese threat was not perceived as imminent in terms of nuclear weapons as China had conventional superiority and had little to gain by attacking India with nuclear weapons[11] China's no-first-use policy as well as its limited deterrent capability, based on a small number of weapons, helped to assuage the threat perceived by the Indian leadership. China also for a long time gave the impression that its main nuclear adversaries were the United States and the Soviet Union.

The Indira Gandhi era saw major evidence of balance of power of a hard-balancing variety working in the Indian elite's thinking. India's formation of the quasi-alliance with the USSR in August 1971 by concluding the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation was in response to the United States–China rapprochement and their quasi-alliance with Pakistan. Although India was

receiving Soviet weaponry and political support since 1962, the semi-formal alliance was a major step forward in an external balancing strategy. The threat level to India increased dramatically as the Chinese and American support to Pakistan's repressive policies in East Pakistan and the United States' hostile attitudes under Nixon–Kissinger team prompted Mrs Gandhi to seek military and diplomatic assistance from the Soviet Union. Even then, it was not a full-fledged alliance as India tried its best to give the impression that it was a friendship treaty and not an alliance. Some believe the treaty provision of immediate mutual consultation in the event of external aggression gave India Soviet security assurances in the context of the impending India–Pakistan War of 1971 (Radyuhin, 2011). As the war ended with India's massive victory and the bifurcation of Pakistan, the threat level perceived by the Indian leadership also changed. The intensification of the China–Pakistan security relationship should have added to India's need for a hard-balancing strategy. However, the hibernation of the nuclear weapons programme until the 1990s even after India's nuclear testing in May 1974 suggests that international status and domestic electoral calculations motivated Mrs Gandhi to order the solo test more than balance of power and deterrence considerations (Perkovich, 1999, p. 178). If it were balance of power and deterrence the chief calculations, India should have developed an operational deterrent force immediately and not to wait until evidence came of Pakistan's successes and China–Pakistan nuclear collaboration during the 1980s, with the United States closing its eyes on Zia ul Haq's nuclear weapons programme. Hard-balancing considerations for India occurred largely in response to Pakistan's nuclear development in the 1980s, in collaboration with China. The decision by Rajiv Gandhi to relaunch the nuclear weapons programme in 1988 was motivated by Pakistan's successes in this area and the lukewarm responses his own nuclear disarmament proposals were received in the West (Singh & Subramanyam, 1998, p. 44). China–India relations remained hostile during the post-1962 period and there were border clashes in 1967 and a near clash in 1987. Full diplomatic relations at the ambassador level were re-established in 1979 following a successful visit of External Affairs Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, to China in February 1979. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to Beijing in December 1988 was a landmark event when a number of arrangements including a joint working group on border settlement was established. The decision was to normalise relations while pursuing negotiations on the border (contrary to earlier Indian insistence on settling the territorial dispute before normalising relations) with the aim of improving economic and trade relations. During the 1991–1996 period, the Narasimha Rao Government initiated the 'Look East Policy' aimed at improving economic relations with Southeast Asia and East Asia by enhancing connectivity through India's Northeast which also partially aimed at improving relations with China, by highlighting economic relations over territorial disputes (Mehrotra, 2012).

The Atal Bihari Vajpayee Era (1998–2004) saw the beginnings of some active hard balancing by India. It took a key domestic change, the arrival of the BJP-led coalition government in 1998 that led to the balancing thinking to come to the forefront. The Vajpayee period was marked by hard balancing by way of nuclear testing in May 1998 and justifying the decision as forced by the China threat.

Defence Minister George Fernandez defended the nuclear tests by arguing that China, not Pakistan was India's 'potential threat No. 1' (Burns, 1998). Yet, the Indian leaders subsequently modified or downplayed the China threat and the Indian nuclear build-up was limited even during this period.[12] The Vajpayee government in June 2003 recognised China's takeover of Tibet by accepting it as an integral part of China and not to allow 'anti-China activities' by Tibetan refugees in India. In return, China agreed to begin trading with Sikkim, the tiny Himalayan state that joined the Indian Union in 1975 (Kahn, 2003). The decision to test nuclear weapons was more for status reasons and for long-term balance of power calculations than a decline in security.[13] The immediate provocations were the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty extension in perpetuity and the conclusion of the Comprehensive Test Ban treaty which India opposed stridently. India feared of being boxed in as a non-nuclear weapons state permanently due to the tightening noose of the non-proliferation regime, which the Western countries were pursuing through the UN system (Paul, 1998). The BJP also saw it as an opportunity to strengthen its domestic position by acting tough on national security issues.[14] Subsequent governments have not actively balanced nuclear advances by China or for that matter, Pakistan. In 2023, China had some 410 nuclear weapons, that included many intermediate-range missiles useful against India, and Pakistan with 170 weapons held a slight edge over India's 164 (Arms Control Association, 2023).

The return of the Congress-led coalition under Manmohan Singh in 2004 saw India building a strategic partnership with the United States. The 2005 Civil Nuclear Agreement resulting in the US–India rapprochement took place as the Manmohan Singh Government viewed it as a necessary step to exit from the nuclear sanctions by the major powers and their allies resulting in a 'nuclear apartheid'. The George W. Bush administration considered the rapprochement as a balance of power act or a precursor to developing a coalition-type relationship with India, a swing state vis-à-vis China.[15] India's behaviour in developing this relationship with the United States constituted a soft-balancing effort as opposed to hard-balancing behaviour. For a hard-balancing coalition would have required a higher level of military coordination and support in case each was attacked by another state. Despite the nuclear rapprochement, no active military alignment between the United States and India took place during this period. In spite of American prodding, India still continued to purchase weapons from a variety of sources including Russia, France and Israel. The US–India strategic cooperation increased with the signing of the 2005 'New Framework for India–US Defense Relations', several bilateral and multilateral exercises, the 2016 upgrading of India by the Obama administration as a 'major defence partner', and the naval agreement allowing naval craft to use each other's facilities for repair and berthing rights (Embassy of India, 2017; Malik, 2016, p. 52; Panda, 2017). India's joining BRICS and collaboration with China in international negotiations on climate change, etc. assuaged the fear of a war with China as China also saw India as a partner in the rising power paradigm of the period.

The BJP under Narendra Modi coming into power in 2014 saw India accelerating its border infrastructure building and arms deployment some of which were

started during the Manmohan Singh period. The Modi government stepped up the naval build-up and witnessed increasing conflict with China on the un-demarcated border. The 2017 Doklam and the 2020-21 Ladakh crises were intense episodes, the latter resulting in some 20 Indian casualties and an undisclosed number on the Chinese side. Although much of the Indian response to increased Chinese belligerence has been asymmetrical, there is increased sign of hard balancing in Indian behaviour. China's military spending of US$292 billion in 2022 was over three and half times higher than India's $81.4 billion (SIPRI Factsheet, 2023). Despite the increasing border challenges from China, Modi also pursued summit diplomacy (some 18 meetings with Xi during the 2014–2019 period) and a hedging strategy to avoid an intense balance of power competition. After initial hesitation, by 2020 Modi pursued the Quad partnership with the United States, Japan and Australia. The Quad idea has been around since 2004 with occasional meetings and expressions of keen interest from the other member states. Trade relations with China took a priority despite balance of trade in China's favour in a massive way. India's refusal to joining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership involving China and 14 other Asia-Pacific states once again showed that balancing remains at the level of institution level, but is otherwise tepid in this asymmetrically interdependent pair. The Ladakh crisis itself was dissipated in February 2021 when both sides agreed to withdraw their troops from the contested areas surrounding the Line of Actual Control (LAC) near the Pangong Lake and India agreeing to re-establish trade and investment relations affected by the crisis.

In response to China's rapid rise, both economically and militarily, the Indian strategy has been characterised by limited arms build-up (asymmetrical or limited hard balancing); soft-balancing using diplomatic coalitions, strategic partnerships and institutional balancing as well as diplomatic engagement. The hard balancing is asymmetrical as it involves the development and purchase of quality weapons and increased infrastructure development on the difficult terrain facing the 3,488-km border with China. It is, however, not on par with China's efforts in both areas. The soft-balancing measures include a partnership with the United States, a Japan and Australia within the Quad structure India has also attempted to deepen bilateral relations with the Asia-Pacific countries through its Look East/Act East policies (Paul, 2018b, pp. 136–139). Some countries like Vietnam have received military supplies from India, but a serious balancing coalition is yet to emerge there as well. In the aftermath of the 2020 border clashes in Ladakh, possibilities existed for some additional hard-balancing measures by India. During the crisis, India accelerated weapons import from France and Russia, sped up infrastructure building in the border area, and deployed several contingents of forces on the border, largely for defensive purposes. The ₹38,900 crores purchase included deep strike aircraft such MiG 29 and Sukhoi-30 from Russia and advanced cruise and air-to-air missiles. In addition, India was also expediting the purchase of several Rafale fighter aircraft from France (Pandit, 2020). The naval strength is also beefed up in the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal. These long-delayed purchases were accelerated in view of the crisis and the increased threat perceptions felt by the Indian leadership. Even then arms acquisitions remain asymmetrical in

nature. Further, the nuclear build-up of India has been limited and meant for an assured retaliation strategy in the long run. The testing of different ranges of missiles, capable of reaching many cities of China have been ongoing, but their deployment appears to be slow and not in a hurry. India's main nuclear adversary is Pakistan which has a first-use policy, unlike India or China, even though their no-first-use policies have been qualified in recent years. The 800-km Agni-I to the 3,000–5,000-km range Agni-V missiles and a slew of aircraft constitute the Indian delivery systems, and India is developing both Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicles and submarine-based missiles as well, but the programme is yet to achieve all the hallmarks necessary for deterrence (Narang, 2018). Clearly, long-term balancing and effective deterrence are key considerations for the Indian build-up, but even here the developments have been asymmetrical. The Modi government's responses are indeed in the direction of hard-balancing realm and as the perceived Chinese threat increases on the border and the Indian Ocean the Indian balancing efforts are likely to increase. Even with the increasing strategic relationship with the United States under the Biden administration India has avoided talks of a military alliance, but focused on long-term strengthening of India as a technological and economic counterbalance to China as evident in the joint statement issued after the Biden–Modi summit in June 2023 (*Joint Statement from the United States and India*, 2023).

China's Strategy as an Enabler of Underbalancing by India

The Chinese strategy of benign negligence might be part of the reason for India's underbalancing. The opponent's strategy of mixing diplomacy and limited border threats suggests that India has some confidence in the manageability of this rivalry. China has pursued a peculiar strategic approach towards India, often ignoring India as a threat and not even a power to be reckoned with (Shirk, 2004). However, occasionally Beijing does counter India for reasons such as the US–India rapprochement. Since the arrival of the Xi regime, the threat level seems to have increased as evident in the increased border activism. The initial enthusiasm for friendship was replaced by hostility as India gave asylum to fleeing Dalai Lama and his followers in March 1959. The 1962 border war and subsequent withdrawal from occupied areas in the Northeast (NEFA or today's Arunachal Pradesh) were meant to teach India a lesson.[16] China's post-1962 support for Pakistan can be seen as a limited hard-balancing act. However, this support was never big enough to force India to form a countervailing military coalition. During the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, China made limited threats on the border but did not follow through.[17] Only in 1971, this changed with the United States aligning with China and supporting Pakistan. The US–China alignment was primarily targeted on the Soviet Union, but as a Soviet strategic partner, India was viewed by Beijing as a target for balancing behaviour. China's support to Pakistan's nuclear build-up was aimed at balancing India's capabilities vis-à-vis its ally, in view of the 1974 Indian test. China opposed India's nuclear tests in 1998 and later challenged the US-led efforts to recognise India as a de-facto nuclear power and continued its opposition to including India as a member of the

Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). Subsequently, Chinese officials and scholars have dismissed the idea of a US–China–India strategic triangle (Korolev & Wu, 2019).

China's nuclear build-up has been largely US-focused, although Beijing's plans to develop some 1,000 nuclear weapons by 2030 (*Washington Post*, 2024) will increase its capabilities vis-à-vis India too. China has avoided any mention of India's nuclear weapons in its nuclear strategy. Beijing's build-up and deployment of intermediate-range nuclear weapons after India's tests can be considered as asymmetrical hard balancing as India is yet to obtain foolproof second-strike ability. Yet there is barely any mention of India in China's defence white papers (Garver, 2002). China probably has earmarked some of the DF-21 intermediate-range missiles for India which are now undergoing modernisation and the same missiles are useful against US naval forces in the Pacific. China also has SSBN forces, but this is not needed for an assured retaliation on India (Narang, 2018, pp. 195–196). Further, on the water dispute of China building dams in Brahmaputra River, there has not been much cooperation. Even then, 'riparian relations between them have remained relatively stable because both sides have adopted measures to minimize hot-button issues and prevent conflict from escalating' (Ho, 2018, p. 146). They have used de-securitisation strategies such as 'inclusive rhetoric,' 'agreement to share data', and 'periodic expert level meetings' to avoid escalation of the dispute (Ho, 2018, p. 152). India's reluctance to securitise is also interesting as water denial could be perceived as a serious threat, but in this case, is not yet perceived as existential threat to India's Northeast.

China's engagement of India through BRICS, G-20, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), etc. suggests that institutional engagement and soft-balancing have been also China's strategies towards India. These have limited the scope of the rivalry to an extent as existential adversaries do not often engage each other through institutions as the India–Pakistan case shows. Yet, blocking India's membership in the UN Security Council as a permanent member and the NSG for reasons of status denial are sore points in this relationship. From Indian perceptions, China clearly does not want to see India emerging as a peer competitor or status-equivalent in Asia-Pacific.[18]

Increasingly, China has pursued periodic limited intrusions on the contested border as well as cooperation with India simultaneously in an effort to prevent India from forming a balance-of-power coalition with the United States. The confrontations of 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017 and 2020–2021 and an increasing number of minor incursions all suggest a tougher posture by the Xi regime towards India as the incursions seemed to have occurred first from the Chinese side. The frequency of such border conflicts has increased under Xi Jinping as India began to strengthen its border infrastructure and troop strength in response to China's more active build-up (Fravel, 2020, pp. 174–175). Whenever a threat of alignment by India reappeared, China used diplomatic and military pressures in a wedge strategy which appeared to have some success as India has been reluctant to form an intense hard-balancing coalition at least until now. The Chinese strategy of combining diplomacy and limited threats have helped to assuage India's possible fears of an existential rivalry. In many ways, China's efforts have been to keep India as a lower threat by not focusing on averting India from joining any alignments. China's relationship with Pakistan is of a limited hard-balancing variety, but

Beijing has not offered the kind of military support of a close ally in 1965, 1971 or 1999, the three occasions when Pakistan fought wars with India. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is aimed at China's extension to the Arabian Sea. The BRI runs though the Indian Ocean. Yet, China has not militarised the two projects despite massive economic investments. The possibility exists for China engaging in more provocative measures if its CPEC (which runs through the contested Gilgit–Baltistan region) and other BRI investments are challenged by India. More importantly, if India forms a hard-balancing coalition with the United States, China will attempt a more close-knit hard-balancing coalition with Pakistan, although the effect of which may be countervailed by the lingering US and Western influence in Pakistan. The implication here is that China's strategy of limited conflict and cooperation has reduced India's threat perceptions and they have not yet become the existential variety.

The key form of balancing that has been taking place in the India–China dyad is limited hard balancing as well as soft balancing. Since 2017, the limited hard balancing has increased and soft-balancing became less prominent. Balancing against threats as opposed to power has characterised this relationship for several decades until the late 1990s. As a result of the 1996 and 2005 agreements, both sides have observed the non-use of firearms by patrolling troops even during intense crises. India wants to keep strategic autonomy as it realises that forming a military alliance with another power like the United States may reduce the chances of keeping that option alive. India wants to rise as an independent major power, and this larger strategic goal could be compromised if it joins a military coalition with the West. There is also a 'fear of entrapment' as well as 'abandonment' (Snyder, 1984) by Washington in India's behaviour.[19] The concern in this respect is that an alliance with the United States, for instance, need not protect India against a major Chinese aggression as the United States is not necessarily going to intervene on India's side when the crunch time comes. On the other hand, India may get entrapped in America's conflicts with China which have little bearing on India's strategic interests. These considerations are slowly changing with China pushing hard India on the border for tactical territorial gains.

India has kept the threat of joining an alliance with the United States as part of a hedging strategy, keeping in perspective the long-term possibilities and threat scenarios. China's effort has been to pressure India to make concessions on the border, but not to the point in which New Delhi will be forced to form a military coalition against it. Beijing appears to realise that such a coalition could be a powerful force against China in the Indo-Pacific. China has pursued several strategies to avoid the impression of being determined to overthrow the international order. Its peaceful rise strategy has been reasonably reassuring up until Xi's arrival. Its incorporation of India in institutional forums such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization suggested that India could be part of its efforts to reshape the order in favour of the Asian century. The two banks that BRICS have set up, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), both have major Indian participation. The BRI is a unilateral Chinese initiative and India has abstained from it fearing a subsidiary role. The BRI is not yet properly militarised by China, although this could change in the coming years (Han & Paul, 2020).

In recent years, China has increased its economic relationship with all South Asian neighbours of India, in particular, smaller states that were under Indian dominance for a long period. China has strengthened ties by offering them economic assistance, trade privileges, infrastructure development, and in some cases, developing and leasing ports and other facilities. This is still an exercise to enlarge its influence through economic means as the smaller states have been able to avoid becoming military allies against India (Paul, 2019). Both India and China have multiple relationships and strategic goals, some of which entail different coalitions and issue-based cooperation. The security threats are not straightforward either. Multiple and overlapping security challenges require different coalitions and strategic triangles (Paul & Underwood, 2019).

However, as China's power capabilities increase and it pursues more threatening policies, India's balancing behaviour has been changing. China has been strengthening its own internal capabilities by building an active presence in the largely un-demarcated border with India and infrastructure superior to India's for rapid action. Beyond its border, China now has slowly increased its presence in the Indian Ocean, but not to the extent of posing a direct threat to Indian capabilities which are sufficient to handle naval threats as of now. However, this could change as China's ambitions alter, or in reaction to India strengthening its naval capabilities.

Future Prospects of Hard Balancing

The first step in this direction will be a massive increase in naval presence by China in the Indian Ocean and obtaining naval bases in the Indian Ocean littoral states and when India feels it is militarily corned on both sides. The much touted 'string of pearls' strategy of China is yet to develop into full-spectrum, but limited signs are there in the long run as its capabilities widen.[20] India has been developing some naval capabilities and said to have sufficient defence and deterrent power to thwart Chinese or Pakistani naval challenges. The naval threat scenario could, however, change if China expands its naval forces massively and develops many bases in the Indian Ocean region in the coming years. India has also been offering naval cooperation to the West, in particular the US Navy. India's logistical base agreements with the United States, France, and Australia are of limited hard-balancing variety as they do not presuppose mutual help in times of crisis. The joint military exercises like 'Malabar' are aimed at signalling the possibility of coordinating actions. Hence, hard balancing requires joint operational planning with institutional structures and formally declared commitment for mutual assistance in the event of a war. So far India has opted for some interoperability and institutional structures but not a formal mutual assistance treaty.

The second factor to propel intense hard-balancing behaviour could be the improved infrastructure in the Himalayas for both countries, encouraging them to unilaterally change the LAC which currently remains ill-defined. An increased offensive intent will be noticeable if forward deployments and offensive postures are created by the contestants. Since the arrival of Xi Jinping, China has also engaged in an increasing number of border skirmishes with India on the

undermarketed border (in 2013, 2014 and 2015). The 2017 Doklam and the 2020 Ladakh crises have been some of the most violent episodes although neither witnessed the use of lethal weapons by either side. Before the crises boiled over to war, both sides seemed to return to some kind of status quo ante on territorial behaviour through diplomatic engagement. However, the continuation of the pin-pricking and salami-slicing of the PLA has provoked India to form limited hard-balancing coalitions with the United States, Japan and Australia and increasingly strengthening its border with more military deployments as well as infrastructure development. These responses are still asymmetrical in nature as China has advantages in the overall capability balance. Even in 2022, the Quad remains a soft-balancing coalition with the potential to become a limited hard-balancing partnership if and when they have more military-to-military interoperability cooperation.

Theoretical and Policy Implications

The relative absence of intense hard balancing in the strategic behaviours of India and China shows that balancing is not automatic as structural theories tend to project and that an increase in power capabilities of an opponent is not sufficient to create hard-balancing coalitions. The theory of balancing against high threats is more pertinent in the contemporary era. Ordinary threats are not sufficient for hard-balancing coalitions to emerge. Whenever states fear existential threats, they have a greater incentive to form hard-balancing coalitions if they are unable to meet the threat by themselves. The nuances of balancing behaviour as well as the progression from soft to hard balancing are not properly captured in the mainstream IR literature on balance of power.

The second implication is that if states wish to avoid intense balance of power competition they have to make serious efforts to project themselves as not threatening the core territorial integrity and existential identity markers of their adversaries. Ambitious grand strategies such as a 'thousand cuts' pursued by Pakistan against India or the right-wing Hindu groups notion of 'Akhand Bharat' implying the undoing of partition all bode ill for state behaviour. Hard balancing becomes a truism and balancing efforts breeds more balancing as the security dilemma increases with each step the adversaries undertake.

Finally, the Sino-Indian rivalry is not destined to become an existential rivalry in the immediate future if both sides, in particular the stronger China, restrain their active needling policies. China's increased frequency of 'salami slicing' of the contested border for tactical reasons and the desire to coerce India into submission will only persuade the weaker party which has its own major power ambitions to seek formal allies if it perceives war and humiliating defeat as a possibility. Much worse will be if China attempts to encircle India with an overwhelming naval presence in the Indian Ocean and seeks hegemony over the small island states that have been in India's sphere of influence for so long. Existential security will become the primary motive of India, and hard balancing will emerge as a necessary response to such a contingency.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Kanti Bajpai, Rajesh Basrur, Yuen Foong Khong, Manjeet Singh Pardesi, Rohan Mukherjee and Brandaon Yoder for their useful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. It should be noted that balancing is only one strategy in the arsenal of states as in the face of huge power disparities, states may bandwagon with the powerful state or pursue neutrality among other strategies.
2. Fravel (2020, pp. 174–175) has argued that major improvements in India's border infrastructure, although not on par with China's, India, active deterrence force posture and increased patrolling by its forces on the border as causes of China's military activism on the border in the 2000s.
3. Nehru in an interview with the Guardian said: 'The Chinese are unlikely to invade India because they know that this would start a world war, which the Chinese cannot want.' Interview with Nehru in the *Guardian*, 23 October 1961 (Raghavan, 2010, pp. 279–280).
4. In the 1950s, common struggle against imperialism was a factor in Nehru's calculations (Baruah, 2015; see also, Raghavan, 2010, pp. 279–280).
5. On this episode, see Kux (1992, pp. 210–211).
6. For this, see https://ourworldindata.org/military-spending
7. For the larger phenomenon (see Jervis, 2017). Reputational reason is also ascribed as a cause of Nehru's unwillingness to make territorial compromises (see Shankar, 2018).
8. Pardesi (2019a) argues that the USSR did not support India during the 1986–1987 Sumdorong Chu crisis between India and China involving face to face confrontation of some 400,000 troops in the Eastern sector and the special strategic relationship between the two with respect to China came to an end.
9. Although these initial conceptions deriving from their status as two large 'newly independent Asian countries, they have gradually grown apart as China has become a stronger economic power' (Pu, 2018, p. 59). The differing status conception is a source of the enduring rivalry between the two states (see Bajpai, 2021).
10. For these figures, see Kavic (1967, pp. 192–193) and Thomas (1978, p. 3).
11. On Indian calculations and different points of views of the political elite, see Perkovich (1999, pp. 8–84).
12. The three mainstream positions between 1998 and 2003 in India viewed, China as not an immediate military threat but potential long-term threat; 'China's worldviews converged' with India in 'many important ways', except on issues like support for Pakistan; and China has 'motives inclining it toward responsible and sober policies regarding India' (Hoffmann, 2004, pp. 40–41).

13. For the status motive, see Perkovich (1999, pp. 6–8).
14. For the domestic politics argument, see Bajpai (2009).
15. On the US calculations, see Rice (2000).
16. For such a perspective, see Garver (2006).
17. On this, see Pringsheim (1965).
18. For a discussion of the status competition between the two states, see Pu (2018).
19. For such views, see Kunhani et al. (2012, p. 32) and Mehta (2016). For a rebuttal view, see Rajagopalan (2017).
20. On this, see Basrur et al. (2019).

References

Arms Control Association. (2023). *Nuclear weapons: Who has what at glance*. https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/nuclear-weapons-who-has-what-glance

Bajpai, K. (2009). The BJP and the bomb. In S. D. Sagan (Ed.), *Inside nuclear South Asia* (pp. 25–67). Stanford Security Studies.

Bajpai, K. P. (2021). *India versus China: Why they are not friends*. Juggernaut.

Baruah, A. (2015, May 13). When Nehru and Mao met. *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/Comment-piece-on-the-Mao-Nehru-conversation/article62118953.ece

Basrur, R. (2021, June 21). *Shadow realism in the India–China strategic rivalry* [Paper presentation]. LKY school conference on 'IR Theory and China–India Relations'.

Basrur, R. (2023). *Subcontinental drift: Domestic politics and India's foreign policy*. Georgetown University Press.

Basrur, R. M., Mukherjee, A., & Paul, T. V. (Eds.). (2019). *India–China maritime competition: The security dilemma at sea*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Bole, Z. (2005). Zhongyin Guanxi—Xinxinde Daguo Guanxi [Sino-India relations—A new type of great power relations]. *Dangdai Yatai [Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies]*, *8*, 31–36.

Burns, J. F. (1998, May 5). India's new defense chief sees Chinese military threat. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/05/world/india-s-new-defense-chief-sees-chinese-military-threat.html

Das, D. (Ed.). (1974). *Sardar Patel's correspondence, 1945–1950, Volume X* (Vol. 44). Navajivan Publishing House.

Diehl, P. F. (2018). Whither rivalry or withered rivalry. In T. V. Paul (Ed.), *The China–India rivalry in the globalization era* (pp. 253–272). Georgetown University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv75db2z

Elman, C. (2003). Introduction: Appraising balance of power theory. In J. A. Vasquez & C. Elman (Eds.), *Realism and the balancing of power: A new debate*. Prentice Hall.

Embassy of India. (2017, June). *Brief on India–U.S. relations*. https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India_US_brief.pdf

Fravel, M. T. (2020). Stability in a secondary strategic direction: China and the border dispute with India after 1962. In K. P. Bajpai, S. Ho & M. C. Miller (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of China–India relations*. Routledge.

Ganguly, Š., Pardesi, M. S., & Thompson, W. R. (2023). *The Sino-Indian rivalry: Implications for global order*. Cambridge University Press.

Garver, J. (2002). Asymmetrical Indian and Chinese threat perceptions. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *25*(4), 109–134. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390412331302885

Garver, J. W. (2001). *Protracted contest: Sino-Indian rivalry in the twentieth century*. University of Washington Press.

Garver, J. W. (2006). China's Decision for War with India in 1962. In A. I. Johnston & R. S. Ross (Eds.), *New directions in the study of China's foreign policy* (pp. 86–130). Stanford University Press.

Han, Z., & Paul, T. V. (2020). China's rise and balance of power politics. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, *13*(1), 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poz018

Ho, S. (2018). Power asymmetry and the China–India water dispute. In T. V. Paul (Ed.), *The China–India rivalry in the globalization era* (pp. 137–162). Georgetown University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv75db2z

Hoffmann, S. A. (2004). Perception and China policy in India. In F. R. Frankel & H. Harding (Eds.), *The India–China relationship: What the United States needs to know* (pp. 40–41). Columbia University Press, Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

Jervis, R. (2017). *Perception and misperception in international politics* (new ed.). Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77bx3

Joint Statement from the United States and India. (2023). https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/06/22/joint-statement-from-the-united-states-and-india/

Kahn, J. (2003, June 25). China and India edge a bit closer to a border accord. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/25/world/china-and-india-edge-a-bit-closer-to-a-border-accord.html

Kaufman, S. J., Little, R., & Wohlforth, W. C. (Eds.). (2007). *The balance of power in world history*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230591684

Kavic, L. J. (1967). *India's quest for security: Defence policies 1947–1965*. University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520331600

Kennedy, A. B. (2015). Nehru's foreign policy: Idealism and realism conjoined? In D. Malone, C. Raja Mohan & S. Raghavan (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Indian foreign policy* (1st ed., pp. 92–103). Oxford University Press.

Kissinger, H. (1995). *Diplomacy* (1. Touchstone ed). Simon & Schuster.

Korolev, A., & Wu, F. (2019). Is there a U.S.–China–India triangle?—Beijing's official views. *India Review*, *18*(4), 437–456. https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2019.1662187

Kunhani, S., Kumar, R., Mehta, P. B., Raghavan, S., Saran, S., Nilekani, N., & Varadarajan, S. (2012). *NonAlignment 2.0: A foreign and strategic policy for India in the twenty-first century*. Center for Policy Research. https://cprindia.org/briefsreports/nonalignment-2-0-a-foreign-and-strategic-policy-for-india-in-the-twenty-first-century/

Kux, D. (1992). *India and the United States: Estranged democracies*. National Defense University Press.

Little, R. (2007). *The balance of power in international relations: Metaphors, myths, and models*. Cambridge University Press.

Malik, M. (2016). Balancing act: The China–India–U.S. triangle. *World Affairs*, *179*(1), 46–57. https://doi.org/10.1177/0043820016662742

Mastro, O. S. (2019). It takes two to Tango: Autocratic underbalancing, regime legitimacy and China's responses to India's rise. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *42*(1), 114–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2018.1485567

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics* (updated ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.

Mehrotra, L. (2012). India's look east policy: Its origin and development. *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, *7*(1), 75–85.

Mehta, P. B. (2016, April 2). The American hug. *The Indian Express*. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-american-hug-indo-us-relations-narendra-modi-barack-obama-indias-foreign-policy/

Narang, V. (2018). Nuclear deterrence in the China–India dyad. In T. V. Paul (Ed.), *The China–India rivalry in the globalization era* (pp. 188–195). Georgetown University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv75db2z

Panda, A. (2017, April 14). *US implementation of 'major defense partner' perks for India underway*. https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/us-implementation-of-major-defense-partner-perks-for-india-underway/

Pandit, R. (2020, July 3). Amid LAC stand-off, India approves purchase of fighter jets, missiles worth Rs 38,900 crores. *The Times of India*. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/amid-lac-stand-off-india-approves-purchase-of-fighter-jets-missiles-worth-rs-38900-crore/articleshow/76756979.cms

Pape, R. A. (2005). Soft balancing against the United States. *International Security*, *30*(1), 7–45. https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894607

Pardesi, M. S. (2019a). Managing the 1986–87 Sino-Indian Sumdorong Chu crisis. *India Review*, *18*(5), 534–551. https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2019.1703364

Pardesi, M. S. (2019b). The initiation of the Sino-Indian rivalry. *Asian Security*, *15*(3), 253–284. https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2018.1471060

Paul, T. (2019). When balance of power meets globalization: China, India and the small states of South Asia. *Politics*, *39*(1), 50–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718779930

Paul, T. V. (1998). The systemic bases of India's challenge to the global nuclear order. *The Nonproliferation Review*, *6*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1080/10736709808436731

Paul, T. V. (2005). Soft balancing in the age of U.S. primacy. *International Security*, *30*(1), 46–71. https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894652

Paul, T. V. (2014). Strategies for managing China's rise. *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, *16*(2), 11–18.

Paul, T. V. (2018a). Explaining conflict and cooperation in the Sino-Indian rivalry. In T. V. Paul (Ed.), *The China–India rivalry in the globalization era* (pp. 3–23). Georgetown University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv75db2z

Paul, T. V. (2018b). *Restraining great powers: Soft balancing from empires to the global era*. Yale University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5cg9s2

Paul, T. V., & Underwood, E. (2019). Theorizing India–US–China strategic triangle. *India Review*, *18*(4), 348–367. https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2019.1662190

Paul, T. V., Wirtz, J. J., & Fortmann, M. (Eds.). (2004). *Balance of power: Theory and practice in the 21st century*. Stanford University Press.

Perkovich, G. (1999). *India's nuclear bomb: The impact on global proliferation*. University of California Press.

Pringsheim, K. H. (1965). China's role in the Indo-Pakistani conflict. *The China Quarterly*, *24*, 170–175. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741000010225

Pu, X. (2018). Asymmetrical competitors: Status concerns and the China–India rivalry. In T. V. Paul (Ed.), *The China–India rivalry in the globalization era* (pp. 55–74). Georgetown University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv75db2z

Radyuhin, V. (2011, August 8). New challenges and opportunities. *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/New-challenges-and-opportunities/article13646554.ece

Raghavan, S. (2010). *War and peace in modern India*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Rajagopalan, R. (2017). *India's strategic choices: China and the balance of power in Asia*. Carnegie India. https://carnegieindia.org/2017/09/14/india-s-strategic-choices-china-and-balance-of-power-in-asia-pub-73108

Rice, C. (2000). Campaign 2000: Promoting the national interest. *Foreign Affairs*, *January/February 2000*. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/campaign-2000-promoting-national-interest

Riedel, B. O. (2015). *JFK's forgotten crisis: Tibet, the CIA, and Sino-Indian War* (1st ed.). Brookings Institution Press.

Roy, N. (2018). In the shadow of great power politics: Why Nehru supported PRC's admission to the security council. *The International History Review*, *40*(2), 376–396. https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2017.1329156

Schweller, R. L. (2008). *Unanswered threats: Political constraints on the balance of power* (1. pbk. print). Princeton University Press.

Shankar, M. (2018). *The reputational imperative: Nehru's India in territorial conflict*. Stanford University Press.

Sheehan, M. (1996). *The balance of power: History and theory*. Routledge.

Shirk, S. L. (2004). One-sided rivalry: China's perceptions and policies toward India. In F. R. Frankel & H. Harding (Eds.), *The India–China relationship: What the United States needs to know* (pp. 75–100). Columbia University Press, Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

Singh, J., & Subramanyam, K. (Eds.). (1998). Indian nuclear policy—1964–98 (a personal recollection). *Nuclear India*. Knowledge World.

SIPRI Factsheet. (2023). *Trends in world military expenditure, 2022*. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/2304_fs_milex_2022.pdf

Snyder, G. H. (1984). The security dilemma in alliance politics. *World Politics*, *36*(4), 461–495. https://doi.org/10.2307/2010183

The Economic Times. (2023, January 13). India–China trade climbs to USD 135.98 billion in 2022, trade deficit crosses USD 100 billion for the first time. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-china-trade-climbs-to-usd-135-98-billion-in-2022-trade-deficit-crosses-usd-100-billion-for-the-first-time/articleshow/96969775.cms?from=mdr

The Hindu. (2023, January 27). From 5% to 15%, China's share in India's imports tripled in last two decades. https://www.thehindu.com/data/data-from-5-to-15-chinas-share-in-indias-imports-tripled-in-last-two-decades/article66429612.ece

Thomas, R. G. C. (1978). *The defence of India: A budgetary perspective of strategy and politics*. MacMillan.

Thomas, R. G. C. (1986). *Indian security policy*. Princeton University Press.

Walt, S. M. (1990). *The origins of alliances*. Cornell University Press.

Walt, S. M. (2005). Taming American power. *Foreign Affairs*, *84*(5), 105. https://doi.org/10.2307/20031709

Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics* (1st ed). McGraw-Hill.

Washington Post. (2024, June 16). https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/06/16/china-nuclear-arsenal-weapons/

Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Wilson Center Digital Archive. (1963, August 2). *Letter, Homi Bhabha to Jawaharlal Nehru.* History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, National Archives, File No. 17(1773)/76 of India, Prime Minister's Office. http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/165242

Wivel, A., & Paul, T. V. (2020). Soft balancing, institutions, and peaceful change. *Ethics & International Affairs*, *34*(4), 473–485. https://doi.org/10.1017/S089267942000057X