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Mitigating the risk of a China–India conflict

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The Ladakh crisis between China and India seems to have settled into a stalemate, marked by somewhat reduced tactical tensions and continuing fruitless talks on disengagement—but its trajectory could again turn suddenly, even flaring into a limited conventional war. Despite a limited disengagement, both sides continue to make military preparations near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to increase their readiness for potential conflict. While China proved its revisionist intent with its 2020 incursions, its specific goals and plans remain opaque. The broader political context is marked by distrust and hostility, and bilateral relations are at their lowest ebb in decades. War remains unlikely—both sides can ill-afford the distraction from higher national priorities and have demonstrated a recent keenness to step back from the brink. But, with growing capabilities and unclear intent, and with military operations no longer impaired by winter, the Ladakh crisis may still escalate to conflict.

The crisis has been full of surprises. Despite observing major military manoeuvres in China, India didn't anticipate the multiple incursions across the LAC in May 2020.[1] For weeks thereafter, the Indian Army leadership insisted the incursions were nothing out of the ordinary.[2] After both sides agreed to an early disengagement plan, the crisis took a shocking turn

Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi rides in a tank at Longewala in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, 14 November 2020. Wikimedia Commons, online.

with a deadly skirmish in June—the first loss of life on the LAC in 45 years.[3] India also mustered its own surprises, deploying troops to occupy tactically valuable heights in late August, to gain some bargaining leverage.[4] And the crisis also abated with a surprise, with the sudden announcement of disengagement from heavily militarised stand-off sites around Pangong Tso Lake in February 2021.[5]

Future surprises may yet occur. This paper argues that the risk of China–India conflict is significant because, even if its likelihood is low, its consequences may be considerable. A limited conventional war would be likely to impose significant costs on India, but, depending on the reactions of its partners, it may also reinforce latent Indian suspicions over the utility and reliability of its strategic partnerships. In that way, even a localised limited war on the LAC may have far-reaching implications, if it incidentally drives a wedge between India and its partners in the Quad.

Mitigating that risk will require sound policy settings and astute diplomatic and public messaging from Canberra, Washington, Tokyo and other like-minded capitals.

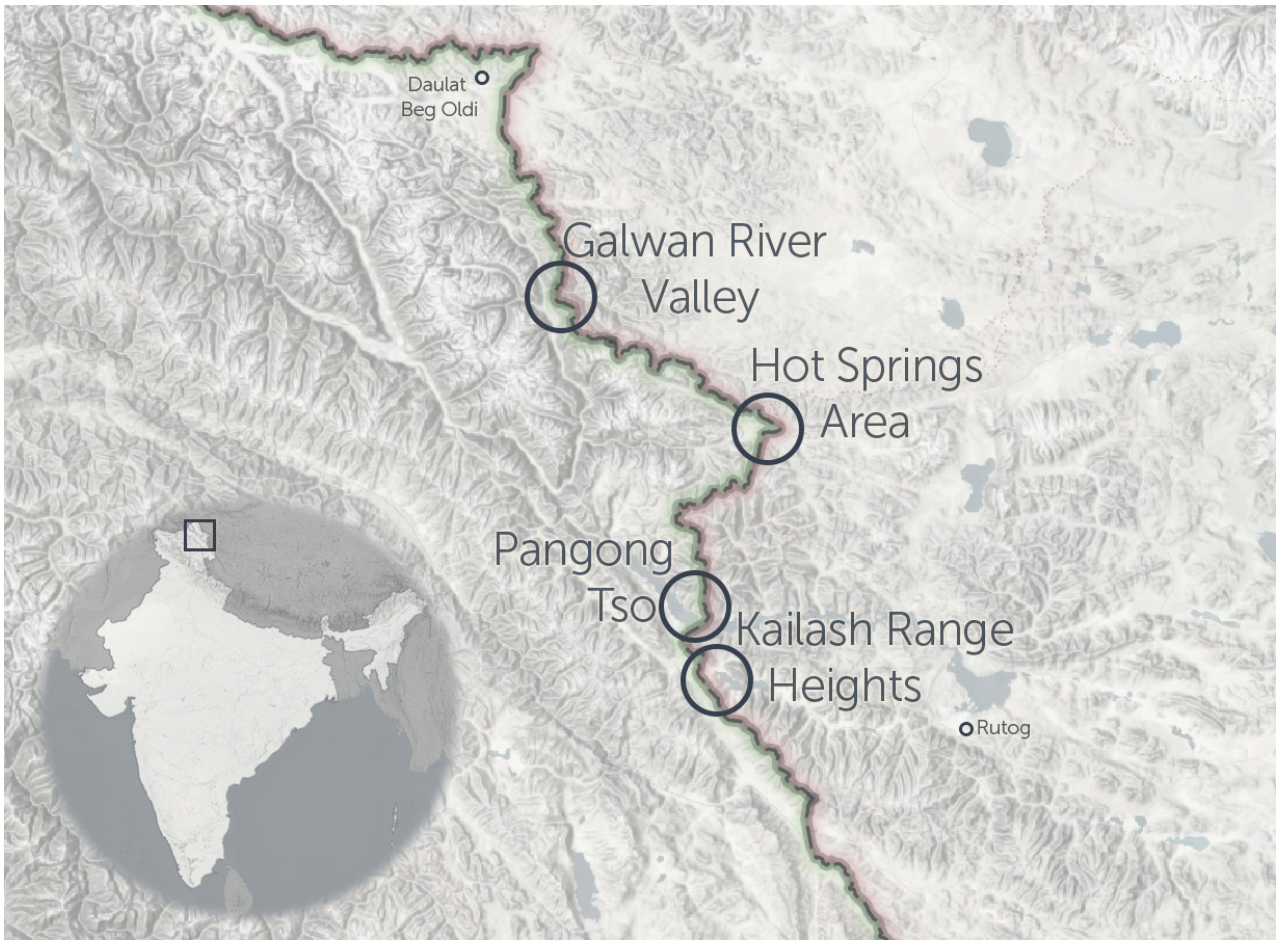
The remainder of this paper is in three parts: first, why a border war is plausible; second, what costs it would impose on India and how it might stir distrust of India's Quad partners; and, finally, a framework to mitigate those risks.

Likelihood: the capabilities and intent for war

Indian and Chinese troops began disengaging from some forward positions in February. This was a considerable achievement—pulling forces back and creating buffer zones calmed stand-off sites near Pangong Tso, which had been the most tense earlier in the crisis. But even if disengagement were fully implemented—and every indication suggests that it's stalled[6]—both sides would still maintain very large combined-arms formations on the LAC that could quickly engage each other. A conflict is plausible because China retains the capability and intent to change the territorial *status quo*, and because both sides' military strategies would incentivise them to escalate the use of force.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been augmenting its military capability on the LAC throughout the crisis. Before the deadly skirmish in June, it was reinforcing its forward troops with a broad range of supporting capabilities, including increased deployments of combat aircraft at nearby bases such as Hotan.[7] After the skirmish, along with India, it continued to reinforce its positions with new barracks, roads, heliports and other construction.[8] It also fortified its positions elsewhere along the India–China border and the LAC.[9] It continued reinforcements through the winter, when military activity in the high Himalayas is particularly challenging.[10] And it continued reinforcing its garrisons within about 120 kilometres from the LAC, even after disengagement began.[11] The PLA has not only expanded its combat power available at the LAC, but also built permanent infrastructure to sustain and support a larger long-term presence there, and to allow forces in rear areas to surge quickly to the front. It has, for example, expanded several staging areas, such as Rutog—at the southeastern extremity of Pangong Tso—to house armour, artillery and troops in new permanent shelters.[12] From multiple such staging bases, the PLA sustains a large force presence that could quickly surge to the front.

Figure 1: India–China border and the LAC showing some stand-off sites of the crisis.



Source: Nathan Ruser, ASPI.

The LAC reinforcements have been backed by general PLA capability development in the Western Theatre Command, which is the operational command responsible for the border with India. Much of that development pre-dates the Ladakh crisis and spans other sections of the LAC beyond Ladakh, but it has continued or accelerated since the crisis began.

Construction or redevelopment work that began in 2019 and 2020 will produce three new airfields in Tibet, each within Chinese fighters' combat radius of the LAC.[13] Existing dual-use airports at Lhasa and Hotan have, since 2017, built new surface-to-air missile sites and hardened aircraft shelters and ammunition and maintenance facilities.[14] For the first time, air defence units from the PLA Ground Force and the PLA Air Force have been integrated into a unified command and control structure.[15] A new section of railway, which will connect Lhasa to Chengdu in the country's interior, is a key national planning priority, in part because it could facilitate the reinforcement of key staging bases nearer the LAC.[16] The Western Theatre Command's infantry and armour formations have also received, probably through expedited delivery since the crisis began, the PLA's most advanced infantry fighting vehicles, multiple rocket launchers and self-propelled artillery.[17]

Those improvements have occurred along the whole length of the LAC, including in the eastern sector, facing the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. In sum, capability developments such as these have already improved the PLA's transport and logistics capacity to surge forces to various points on the LAC and sustain them in wartime. They also expand capabilities, such as light armour or artillery, that are particularly useful for mountain warfare against India, and others, such as air power and air defence, in which India has traditionally enjoyed an advantage on the LAC.

China, of course, isn't alone—India has also built military capability near the LAC, before and during the Ladakh crisis. It deployed the Indian Army's two reserve divisions and, a year after the crisis began, still sustains some 50,000–60,000 troops in eastern Ladakh.[18] It also deployed main battle tanks and surface-to-air missile batteries to positions within 20 kilometres of the LAC and augmented its aircraft presence—including its brand-new Rafale fighters and Apache helicopters—operating at the border.[19]

The Indian Government gave the military services authority to urgently build up war stocks of air-to-ground and anti-tank missiles, and other ordnance, using expedited procurement processes.[20] To sustain its massive troop deployments, India has expanded its ability to house and resupply forces in remote and austere conditions.[21] Much of that capability development has been enabled by the construction of new air and road infrastructure near the LAC, which for the first time allows the Indian Army to position heavy equipment in large numbers near the front. In 2020 alone, the Border Roads Organisation opened 44 new bridges, including eight in Ladakh.[22] Indeed, in the words of External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, 'fortunately for the country … a lot of what happened in 2020 would not have happened five years ago, because the logistics [capabilities] were not in place.'[23]

Regardless of India's improving capabilities, it lacks revisionist intent on the border; its policy has long sought to ratify the *status quo* of the existing LAC.[24] In contrast, China proved its revisionist intent on the LAC with the large, costly and still ongoing Ladakh incursions.

Beijing's precise plans and intent remain unclear. Its public statements on the topic have been sparse and unenlightening. But, given how the crisis unfolded, at least two key objectives are plausible. First, given the locations of its intrusions and even the disengagement plan, which includes certain new buffer zones, China may have been seeking to assert its 1959 claim lines, which has traditionally been its maximalist position in the territorial dispute.[25] Second, more broadly, based on a sample of public writings from the height of the crisis, China may have been seeking to assert itself as the dominant regional power, and remind India of the perils of too close an alignment with the US.[26] Those goals may in turn have been shaped by a range of recent Indian policies that Beijing saw as damaging to its interests, including infrastructure development near the LAC, the abrogation of special autonomous status for Ladakh, and the deepening partnership between India and the US.[27] Without clarity on China's intent, which we shouldn't expect, it's also not clear whether China has been satisfied with the crisis's evolution to date, or whether it plans to press on with future aggression.

There's more clarity on each side's military strategy at the border—and specifically, how they may prompt an escalation of force. China's strategy in the Himalayas is similar to its strategy in the South China Sea, seeking to impose *fait accompli* changes to the territorial *status quo*, often using grey-zone tactics. Its Ladakh incursions achieved a *fait accompli* on the ground, quickly establishing lodgements before Indian forces could react and leaving India with no good military options to reverse them.[28] Even after conventional forces established a presence across the LAC, China used grey-zone tactics—pressure short of conventional force—to consolidate its position. On multiple occasions in the winter, for example, unidentified Chinese personnel in civilian attire were probing beyond PLA positions in Demchok and pressuring local Indian herders to vacate the area.[29] Those tactics are designed to achieve strategic goals without triggering a conventional military conflict. But if China continues to use them in the midst of a highly militarised crisis, when India is better able to detect them and respond forcefully to them, they're less likely to avoid escalation as intended.

Indeed, India's military strategy is centred on escalation. Its military doctrine calls for answering Chinese aggression with a punitive retaliation into Chinese territory.[30] It resiled from executing that concept in 2020 because it lacked viable operational options, but its bold occupation of high ground in the Kailash Range in late August—the Indian Army's high-water mark during the crisis—nevertheless served a similar purpose. Tactically, it sought to deny further Chinese ingress in that sector; strategically, it gained India some leverage for subsequent negotiations.[31] That offensive action proved effective, and the Indian Army will have incentives to pursue similarly bold action in case of future Chinese aggression.

In addition to military strategies that may promote escalation, both governments have embraced the manipulation of risk as a tactic of statecraft. For at least a decade, China has deliberately generated risk in successive crises with its neighbours and the US, coercing its adversary into backing down rather than risking unwanted escalation.[32] More recently, the Modi government has

grown comfortable deliberately generating risk as a form of deterrence, most vividly with its 2019 air strike in Balakot in retaliation for a terrorist attack.[33] Indeed, the August occupation of the Kailash Range heights, just south of Pangong Tso, also shows New Delhi's growing appetite for risk. The commander of the Indian Army's Northern Command, Lieutenant General YK Joshi, later judged that, immediately after India's occupation of the heights, '[w]e were on the edge, we were absolutely on the brink.'[34] Beginning with the incursions themselves, both China and India have taken risks, entirely knowingly and with calculation.

War is certainly not inevitable. In fact, the likelihood is low, because China may have achieved its objectives, India has demonstrated a belated willingness to deter China, and both sides have shown a keenness to disengage. But the crisis has elevated the likelihood of war. Both sides have made significant military preparations for conflict, China's intent is revisionist but opaque, and the interaction of the two sides' strategies and doctrines may promote escalation. And the persistence of several unresolved friction points on the LAC will require both sides to contain any spikes in tension with care, lest they lead to inadvertent escalation. None of those factors, individually or together, is dispositive; but they suggest that the likelihood of conflict is notably higher than before the crisis began.

Figure 2: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the National War Memorial on the 71st Republic day parade, 2020.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, online.

Consequence: strategic costs and political repercussions

If a conflict does occur, it will impose significant costs on both sides, albeit unequally. The PLA's hefty Western Theatre Command (boasting more than 200,000 troops and rapidly modernising equipment, as detailed above) will comfortably absorb the attrition from a short border war. China's greater concern would be the broader political repercussions of a conflict. Its overarching grand strategic priority under Xi Jinping is 'national rejuvenation'. In recent years, however, Beijing has assessed that it faces 'profound changes unseen in a century'—myriad challenges, especially strategic competition and the threat of decoupling with the world's developed economies, which may undermine its national goals.[35] Concerns over this co-incidence of international pressures may have compelled China to adjust its posture and disengage. An open conflict—especially if China is widely perceived as the aggressor—would be likely to invite opprobrium from some quarters. For China, that would be the greatest cost of a conflict with India, because it risks degrading its international position.

In peacetime, China routinely expends considerable effort to minimise such political costs. It has an active and recently redoubled program of political action to shape international narratives and acceptance of its strategic agenda.[36] Global public opinion on China has soured significantly, largely as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and China's abrasive 'wolf-warrior'-style of diplomacy.[37] In response, Beijing has announced an effort to soften its messaging.[38]

In wartime, China would be likely to face increased political push-back. Among states that consider themselves strategic competitors to China, a conflict with India would feed into existing conceptions of China as an aggressive revisionist. Many smaller regional states that currently hedge would probably remain conspicuously quiet, so the level of political costs China would face remains unclear, but Beijing would work strenuously to reduce them. It would marshal a range of non-military tools to make the case that China's war was defensive and triggered by Indian aggression. Under the banner of 'three warfares', Beijing would seek to mobilise its own and international public opinion, shape international political leaders' views, and deploy legal arguments in support of its claims.[39]

Political costs would weigh on Beijing, but, once the battle were joined, they would be balanced by extremely high political resolve to achieve national goals. A border war with India would be a war over sovereignty, which offers little room for compromise. And any war—China's first military campaign in decades—would be freighted with reputational stakes for Xi Jinping and his agenda of national rejuvenation. Therefore, political costs will deter a China otherwise committed to war only if they jeopardise its national rejuvenation—if, for example, a coalition pledges to turn China into an international pariah.[40] Short of that, those costs would be priced into China's calculations of whether to fight a war.

The conventional military balance between China and India overall favours China. Its forces benefit from a much higher proportion of modern weapons systems, greater use of key technological enablers (command, control, communications, computing, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems) that allow them to observe the battlefield and act quickly, and more efficient organisational structures, to operate jointly across military services.[41] On the LAC, the PLA's reinforcements since the crisis began have addressed some of its earlier disadvantages—such as in air power—and its extensive deployment of light armour and rocket artillery is likely to be tactically punishing against Indian forces. The PLA's concept of operations, focusing on 'systems confrontation', will prioritise striking the key nodes in the Indian military, including its leadership, communications and logistics.[42] Those systems concepts, and their underlying technological and organisational requirements, are still relatively foreign to India, where the largely industrial-era military remains focused on generating mass to attrite the enemy.

China's war effort is also likely to extend beyond the border battlefield. Even during the Ladakh crisis, when forces weren't engaged in combat, India's national power grid was penetrated and disrupted by cyberattacks—probably from China.[43] The resulting power outages were temporary and relatively minor, but nevertheless signalled China's ability and interest in causing significant harm—they were acts of coercion. India has long suffered frequent and major cyber intrusions, suggesting chronic systemic vulnerabilities and ongoing efforts by cyber actors to target it.[44] In a potential conflict on the LAC, China may attack India's vital cyber networks—

possibly even including those that regulate critical civilian infrastructure—to add pressure on New Delhi to capitulate to China's demands. India's Chief of Defence Staff, General Rawat, conceded that this would be a significant and enduring vulnerability for India; he has stated that, in cyber capabilities, India 'may not be able to fully catch up with China'.[45] Consistent with the expansive concept of 'systems confrontation', China may consider dual-use and civilian infrastructure as legitimate targets for cyberattacks if they have operational utility in bringing the war to a decisive close. To avoid unnecessary global opprobrium, China would be likely to be selective in its targeting and would maintain deniability in its actions, exploiting the cyber domain's notorious difficulties in attribution.

In a costly war, the repercussions may spill over to damage India's recently developing strategic partnerships, especially with the US and Australia. Indians generally and increasingly view the US positively. In a 2018 poll of the Indian strategic elite—including government officials and non-government analysts—fully 75% of respondents considered the US to be India's most important global partner, although 54% also believed India should remain equidistant between the US and China.[46] The subsequent Covid-19 pandemic and Ladakh crisis, including the loss of Indian soldiers, have hardened Indian attitudes to China—equidistance will find few advocates in today's Delhi.[47] Indeed, Indian policy has reflected this trend. India has deepened cooperation with the Quad since the crisis began, finally accepting Australian participation in the Malabar naval exercise and agreeing to a leaders' summit that announced a major joint policy initiative on Covid vaccines.

Counterbalancing that trend, however, is a latent current of suspicion about the US. The hostility was fuelled by divergent interests and perceptions during the Cold War, especially the US alliance with Pakistan.[48] Events such the deployment of the USS *Enterprise* task group into the Bay of Bengal during the 1971 war are still remembered—or imagined—viscerally in some quarters as symbols of American perfidy. Since then, relations have thawed and cooperation has deepened, based mostly on common interests over China and terrorism, but a cadre of sceptics remains vocal and reflexively hostile to cooperation with the US.[49] Even recent senior officials have decried alignment with the US, including senior consultations and technical defence agreements, as a loss of India's cherished strategic autonomy.[50]

That latent suspicion was suddenly activated in two episodes in April 2021, which injected an unusual sour note into the bilateral relationship. First, the US Navy conducted a freedom of navigation operation (FONOP) patrol through India's exclusive economic zone—which it conducts routinely. Abnormally, it also issued a press release about the patrol. The Indian Government reacted coolly, with a measured statement defending its interpretation of the law of the sea; but the Indian public, and some members of the strategic elite, reacted with outrage. For example, former navy chief Arun Prakash, a typically outspoken proponent of India's security relationship with the US, decried the latest FONOP patrol as 'intimidatory' and its accompanying public statement as 'an impropriety' and 'an act of breath-taking inanity' that risked alienating friends like India.[51]

The second, more serious episode was triggered when the head of India's (and the world's) largest vaccine manufacturer urged President Biden to lift an 'embargo' on vaccine raw materials.[52] In fact, there was no embargo, but US firms were statutorily obligated to fulfil their US Government contracts before other orders. Worse, the US Government had been conspicuously silent in the midst of a sudden explosion in new infections in India. Indian public opinion roundly and loudly denounced the US. As an editorial in a major newspaper pointed out, 'The US came across as unreliable, even when antagonistic countries [that is, China] offered support.'[53] The Biden administration quickly and comprehensively corrected itself, delivering urgent humanitarian aid and longer term support on vaccine raw materials and intellectual property. With that robust US support and the worsening costs of the second wave, the Indian public's ire quickly turned to its own government.

Both episodes quickly receded from the Indian public imagination. The Biden administration's correctives were swift and decisive, and set amid the longer term context of a firm commitment to deepening the US's partnership with India. Neither episode will resonate long into the future like the *Enterprise* incident, but both episodes also carry important lessons that need to be learned in advance of a possible China–India border conflict.

First, and most importantly, they reveal that the US (and by extension other like-minded partners, including Australia) has agency in crafting policies that advance or harm the partnership with India. In both cases, US action or inaction was the underlying trigger for Indian anger—the disputes weren't conjured from nothing. Second, relatedly, astute messaging must be a top priority in policy. In both cases, minor policy missteps were greatly amplified by tone-deaf messaging—a blunt press release and a deafening silence, respectively. More sensitive messaging would ideally mitigate rather than exacerbate the ill effects of unpolished policy. Third, policies on coordination with India should be developed in consultation with India. After the US began rushing aid to India, some forms of aid were flatly rejected by India on the grounds that they were inappropriate and ill-suited to the situation.[54] Fourth, China will seek to exploit any prospective fissure between India and its partners. Its Foreign Ministry and Ambassador to India issued multiple statements extolling China's pandemic relief supplies—failing to mention the fact that most supplies were sold to India, not donated.[55] Finally, the Indian Government's sympathetic political base and the pliant elements in India's media landscape—or, *in extremis*, perhaps the Indian Government itself—may use foreign missteps instrumentally, to deflect blame for Delhi's own shortcomings. Indeed, as its prickly pandemic response has again shown, crafting a favourable public narrative has emerged as a central feature of the Modi government's approach to national security and governance.[56]

As these recent cases of bilateral friction show, unless managed well by India and its growing strategic partners a damaging conflict with China could risk incidentally stirring Indian distrust of the US and other partners, including Australia. As some analysts have argued, Delhi was willing to overlook US missteps on vaccine raw materials because the two countries' strategic partnership—like India's partnership with the Quad as a whole—is based on the necessity of counterbalancing China.[57] But, if partnerships built on counterbalancing China fail to soften the blow of a conflict with China, New Delhi may legitimately begin to question their purported utility.

India knows that its security doesn't depend on the US, Australia or the Quad, even if its strategic interests can be advanced through those partnerships. Indeed, during both the Doklam and the Ladakh crises, India and its partners assiduously maintained both the narrative and the reality of Indian independence in crisis management. India did accept support from the US—in the form of intelligence in both crises, and cold-weather equipment during the Ladakh stand-off—but that support was politically valuable to India in large part because it was delivered behind closed doors.[58] The then-US Ambassador to India, Kenneth Juster, acknowledged that the US provided some support to India during the Ladakh crisis, but pointedly left specific comment to the Indian Government.[59]

Despite wanting to publicly eschew assistance, New Delhi will nevertheless expect support from its deepening partnerships. Expectations of the Quad have been growing sharply, especially since India's conspicuous embrace of it during the Ladakh crisis, capped with the leaders' summit. Certainly, given the Quad's various initiatives and interlocking web of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral activities, the grouping is far better postured to work together for a regional security contingency than it was when it coordinated the 2004 tsunami response.[60] Its broad agenda now includes everything from pandemic vaccines to counterterrorism to climate change and the denuclearisation of North Korea.[61] Set against that range of issues, India sees a more urgent rationale for the Quad: it's the only Quad member to share a border with China, to witness Chinese forces routinely breaching its sovereignty, and now to suffer fatalities at the hands of the PLA. Thus uniquely exposed to Chinese aggression, India has pursued cooperation with the Quad to offset China's enormous power advantages and deter that aggression.

A China–India conflict would present a defining test of the Quad. How the Quad emerges from a possible conflict would be contingent on a range of variables, including the origins and parameters of the conflict. For the sake of this argument, I assume that the conflict is a limited war on the border, which is the most likely scenario, growing out of the Ladakh crisis; but a war initiated by India, or occurring in the Indian Ocean, would carry different implications for India's relations with the Quad. A border war's implications for the Quad would also depend on its operational outcomes—how the Indian and Chinese militaries fare against each other on the ground. Most critically of all, it would depend on the shaping policies that India and its Quad partners design and implement now, before any possible conflict. Ideally, such Quad action could deter a conflict altogether. In the event that deterrence fails, peacetime Quad preparations could either mitigate or exacerbate the risks from a border war.

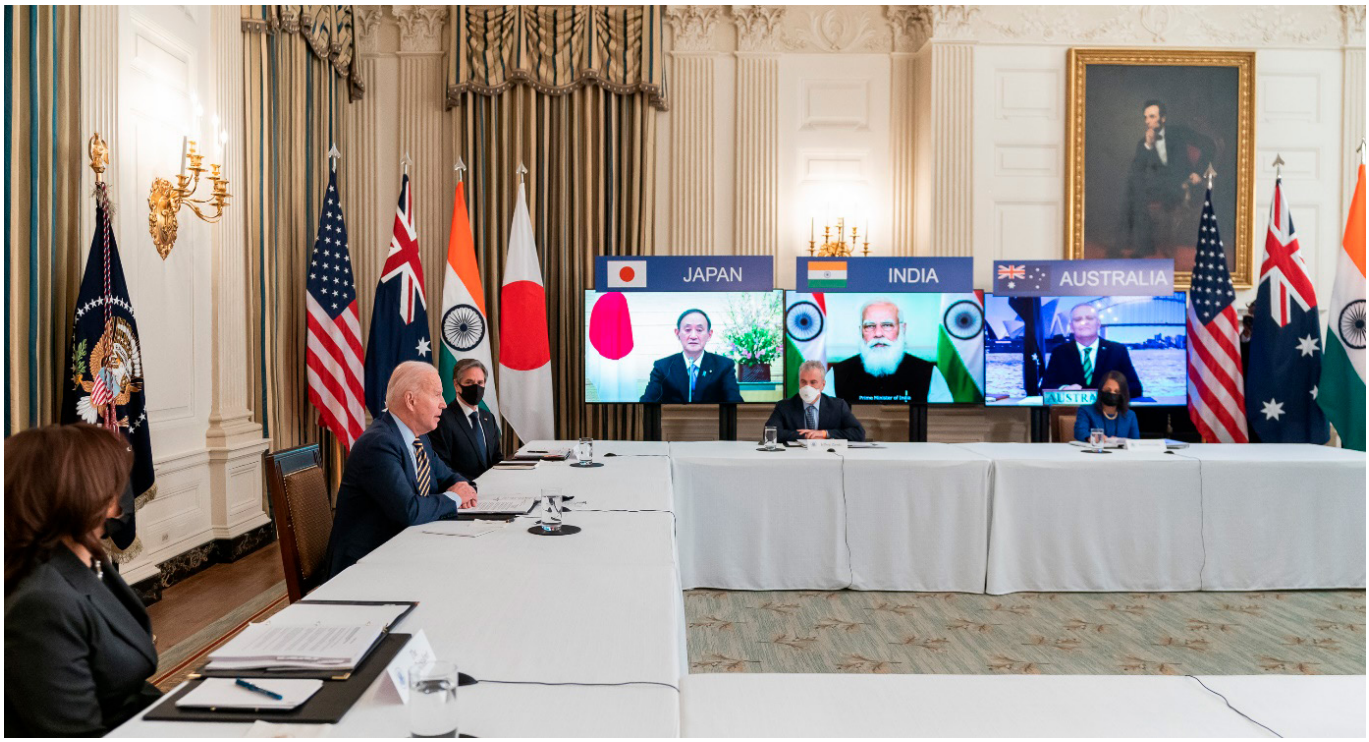
Taking those factors into account, a war could be a catalyst for either strengthening or enervating the Quad. There's a chance that such a conflict would result in a redoubled Indian commitment to the Quad. Much as it did with the Ladakh crisis itself, India may calculate that it has no option but to seek more external assistance to manage its competition with China. Conversely, there's also a chance that such a conflict would result in Indian disaffection with the Quad. India deepened Quad cooperation during the Ladakh crisis partly as a deterrent signal to China, and partly because the Quad is still full of untested promise. However, after a conflict—that is, in a contingency where China hasn't been deterred and has probably imposed significant costs on India—the Quad's utility would have been tested, and probably not ameliorated India's wartime disadvantage. That outcome would be more dangerous for the Quad (and arguably more likely, if current policy settings remain unchanged), so it deserves urgent attention in Canberra, Washington and Tokyo.

Under what conditions would a China–India war jeopardise the Quad? A bruising conflict with China could activate latent Indian distrust of the US and other Quad members. That's especially likely if the conflict is accompanied by some or all of the five conditions that triggered India–US tensions over the FONOP and vaccine supply issues: policy missteps by the US, Australia and other like-minded partners; clumsy public and private diplomatic messaging; lack of consultation with India; Chinese exploitation of the friction; and domestic Indian political manipulation of the friction. And it's especially true because, after many years of apparently uninterrupted deepening alignment, the twin disruptions of April 2021 may have primed New Delhi to see Washington as an unreliable partner.

None of those conditions is inevitable, but they're all plausible, and the presence of even some of them may be enough to produce a damaging outcome. The task before Quad governments is to be sensitised to them and implement mitigation strategies before a possible conflict, to buttress the coalition in advance.

Indian mistrust of its partners is unlikely to decisively fracture the Quad and even less likely to tempt India into some uneasy rapprochement or compact with China. India's national security interests strongly suggest a continued strategic competition with China, and a continued strategic partnership with the US, notwithstanding episodic disruptions.[62] India stands to gain too much from a partnership with the US to abandon it. But that isn't equally true for Australia, about the strategic value of which India has been particularly sceptical until recently. The risk to the Quad is that a jilted and distrustful India will reverse the Quad's recent impressive momentum. An unenthusiastic India could reduce the multiple parallel activities that make up the Quad's agenda, refuse future summit or ministerial meetings, or cease deepening the Quad's military cooperation. The grouping need not be disbanded, but it could wither. That's especially true given the number of other trilateral and minilateral groupings that have recently flourished, which could seek to continue the work of coordinating like-minded nations' policies on China, but which aren't encumbered by the weight of expectations on the Quad. In that case, India would see little benefit in continuing to invest resources and attention, or attract the ire of China, by maintaining or deepening cooperation with the Quad.

Figure 3: President Joe Biden participates in the virtual Quad summit with Australia, India and Japan, Friday 12 March 2021.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, online.

Recommendations: a framework for risk mitigation

Given the risks involved, a possible China–India conflict requires urgent contingency planning in Washington, Canberra, Tokyo and other like-minded capitals. India's partners—especially its Quad partners—have a national interest in minimising the strategic harm inflicted upon India. They have an even more direct interest in reinforcing the partnership in targeted ways to amplify the deterrent signal to Beijing and mitigate the risk of Indian disaffection with the Quad. For them, the primary purpose of policy isn't to offer operational support in wartime, which is likely to be short and offer few opportunities to assist directly. Rather, their main goal would be to deter conflict in the first place; and, failing that, to preserve the long-term strategic partnership with India for the sake of maintaining as powerful and energetic a coalition as possible to counterbalance China.

To shape India's expectations and the strategic environment before any conflict, US and Australian policymakers could usefully consider their responses in three categories, or tiers: support in the theatre of conflict; support in other theatres or domains; and other political or diplomatic action. The policy options that follow aren't exhaustive, but illustrative of that tiered framework.

- ***Operational support.*** As I noted above, the US already provides some military assistance to India in times of crisis, especially in the form of intelligence and certain niche equipment needs. In wartime, its capacity to offer direct support is likely to be severely constrained, not least because New Delhi is highly unlikely to seek direct operational support. Beyond the provision of intelligence, the form of external support India is likely to seek is resupply of ammunition and stores—the Indian military has notoriously small holdings of certain types of war stocks.[63] But, even there, the role of the US will be comparatively limited; most of India's munitions originate elsewhere (especially in Russia, France and Israel) and are not interoperable.

  Another form of in-theatre support could come in the form of consultations in peacetime, before any possible conflict. Here, the US and its other Quad partners could valuably shape the strategic environment by helping the Indian military to war game its concepts of operations and the types of support India may require. US war games for a Taiwan contingency, for example,

consistently suggested that the PLA's integrated air defence system (IADS) would be the centre of gravity in any cross-strait conflict—the US couldn't defeat China without neutralising the PLA's IADS, and China was highly unlikely to succeed without a functioning IADS.[64] A corresponding assessment of the PLA's centre of gravity or key vulnerabilities in a Himalayan contingency would not only be operationally useful for India, but also help to cue the US and partners to the types of security cooperation they should prioritise to shape the pre-conflict environment.

- ***Support in other theatres and domains.*** One of the Quad's key strategic advantages is its wide geographical spread—its members in effect surround China. In a conflict on the India–China land border, for example, they could hypothetically coordinate their military actions to escalate horizontally—that is, to expand the conflict to new areas, thereby stretching the PLA or attacking it where it's comparatively vulnerable. Despite the appealing logic, many specific concepts—such as blockading Chinese energy imports in the Indian Ocean—would face enormous hurdles in implementation.[65] In the case of a smaller conflict on the LAC, other Quad members are highly unlikely to open hostilities against China elsewhere; such a move would be unduly escalatory and would be highly unlikely to affect operations on the LAC. But coordinated military manoeuvres—for example near the Strait of Malacca, one of China's key vulnerabilities—may still be useful to signal to China the latent threat of widening the war. Indirectly, they may be useful to signal Quad members' support for India and disapproval of China to shape the post-conflict environment.

  Support to India in other domains—especially the cyber domain—may be more practical and effective. This is an area where the asymmetry between China and India is currently sizeable, and where China has already demonstrated an intent and capability to strike in times of crisis. In a conflict, India's Quad partners may consider threats or action in cyber operations because they may judge that problems of attribution and the lower likelihood of bloodshed make that a less escalatory option. Indeed, partners' cyber operations need not attack China. Given India's vulnerabilities, partner action to defend Indian networks, with due coordination with Indian authorities, may be a valuable way to reduce the strategic costs of conflict. Ideally, such coordination in peacetime may help to deter conflict, or at least to deter China from attacking dual-use or civilian cyber infrastructure in wartime.

- ***Political and diplomatic support.*** The Quad remains a largely diplomatic, rather than military, enterprise. Its primary value is the opportunity to coordinate policies towards China and to signal to Beijing the prospect of open-ended cooperation among capable regional states. For Beijing, the threat of political isolation or economic decoupling is far more significant than the threat of military costs on the LAC. Indeed, even during the Ladakh crisis, the political costs of a possible continued deterioration in bilateral relations with India probably figured more in Beijing's decision to disengage than any material costs it incurred on the border.[66] In the case of a conflict, then, the Quad's most effective policy instrument may be intangible—a unified political front that threatens Beijing's political position in the region.

  Quad members should also take a more expansive view of political competition, beyond diplomacy. As I argued above, China's wartime strategy against India is likely to include political warfare in the form of its 'three warfares'. To ensure that the like-minded partners don't cede the field to China's campaign, they could also respond in kind. That is, they should seek to engage other regional leaders, craft a robust public affairs effort and deploy legal arguments against Chinese aggression. The audience for those political tools would partly be Beijing—to signal the threat of unpalatable political costs. At least as importantly, however, Quad political support should also be directed at regional states to generate an even wider chorus of opprobrium for China and further increase its political costs.

Preparing policy options in these three tiers should send a deterrent signal to Beijing—ideally, to forestall any prospect of a war. Failing that, they should at least signal to both Beijing and New Delhi—assuming India is the victim of Chinese aggression—that Quad members are reliable and effective strategic partners. Shaping those expectations also requires that any policies be accompanied by active and astute messaging, both public and private. And they should be the product of early and constant consultation with New Delhi itself—most likely in a bilateral, rather than Quad, setting. In part, that consultation would seek to elicit Indian views of what types of wartime support may be valued but, equally, it would seek to convey to India what types of wartime support are feasible.

The tiers of this framework suggest that the options that would, in principle, be most directly relevant to combat operations in a conflict aren't the options that would be most effective in shaping the broader strategic competition against China. Quad members aren't well postured to lend significant operational support to India (and nor would that be politically welcomed by Delhi), but they're better prepared to act in other domains and, even more, to ensure that any Chinese adventurism is politically too costly. That's especially true of Australia, which boasts comparatively minor material capacity but a proven willingness—sometimes at considerable cost to itself—to stand openly in opposition to Chinese coercion elsewhere.

In the event of a conflict on the LAC, both China and India will bear direct military costs. But, as this paper has shown, such a conflict may pose even greater second-order risks, potentially disrupting or dampening India's strategic partnerships with the US and the Quad—unless careful policy options are prepared well in advance of a conflict. This risk is amplified if the drivers of India's strategic partnerships become narrower, focused largely on competition with China and less on shared political values or economic interests. Despite official rhetoric that consistently celebrates shared values, recent developments suggest a waning American enthusiasm for India's economic dynamism and political liberalism.[67] A narrower partnership is a less resilient partnership. If the US and Australia base their India policy largely on shared interests regarding the strategic challenge posed by China—which is legitimate and may be more durable—then a failure to manage that challenge in a wartime contingency could be devastating to the entire relationship.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

FONOP freedom of navigation operation
IADS integrated air defence system
LAC Line of Actual Control
PLA People's Liberation Army

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