

## China and India face challenging times ahead

Written by Joseph Tse-hei Lee 李卓人

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A closer look at many potential conflict zones in East and South Asia reveals an alarming trend of transience and instability. This is particularly true when a nuclear and militaristic North Korea looms, threatening its neighbors and beyond.

We are witnessing what British journalist Gideon Rachman calls a troublesome process of “Easternization,” a dramatic shift of power and wealth from the West to Asia in the early 21st century.

At a time when US President Donald Trump seems unwilling to promote international trade and defend a global security framework built on US-led alliances, China and India are moving up the global hierarchy of superpowers.

They regard one another as geopolitical competitors, with each utilizing diplomatic channels and military tactics to counter the other.

Expansionism is deeply ingrained in the mindsets of Chinese and Indian nation-states, prompting them to advance neoliberal capitalism against economic protectionism, thereby giving a new twist to the forces of globalization and nationalism.

The latest Sino-Indian territorial rivalries show that the two countries are victims of their history of nation-building. Overturning the other’s growing power has become the major geopolitical objective for China and India. By drawing rigid national boundaries in parts of the Himalaya borderlands, they are prepared to challenge each other’s backyard.

While China considers South Asia to be a legitimate area to flex its muscle, India views China as an external intruder.

Troubled by India’s support of the creation of the Dalai Lama’s exiled government in Dharamsala, the ascension of Sikkim to India, and the Indian dominant influence in Bhutan, China has been arming Pakistan to contain India.

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In response to the perceived Chinese threat, India has pursued security collaborations with Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam and Russia.

The open, rules-based international order that the US developed is in decline.

The new geopolitical landscape presents two pressing challenges to China and India.

First, given their enormous national economies, it is not in their interests to engage in border conflicts. The months-long Doklam border stand-off has revealed considerable political, economic and cultural insecurities on both sides.

Without an effective international mechanism to resolve the overlapping claims in the Himalayas, the border crisis has exemplified the conflicting understanding between China and India over control of continental space, as well as over jurisdiction related to disputes in these frontiers.

Second, the Doklam incident has become a new front line for Sino-Indian tensions. The Chinese and Indian ultra-nationalists, within and without their governments, have reacted with fury and resentment. Driven by a narrow view of territorial sovereignty, they fueled a negative, almost xenophobic nationalism and see everything as a zero-sum game.

Projecting themselves publicly as charismatic and visionary leaders, Chinese President Xi Jinping (习近平) and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi thrive on the cult of a nationalist strongman and proclaim to defend national sovereignty at all costs.

Even though they are cynical toward such irrational sentiments in private, the seduction of domestic propaganda and nationalistic rhetoric could restrict their freedom of action to end the crisis.

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If they fail to live up to this image of tough statesmen, they will find it difficult to appeal to local nationalists and win the internal power struggle with their domestic opponents.

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