

Strike Back!

India–China Border Skirmish

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The June 2020 violent clash at Galwan Valley in Ladakh between Indian and Chinese border forces led to the death of 20 Indian soldiers and an indeterminate number of People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops. This clash was the first bloodletting after four-and-a-half decades along the so-called Line of Actual Control (LAC) that substitutes for a disputed border. The two giant Asian neighbors, who are also nuclear powers, fought with stones and sticks.¹

What factors, as the Germans say, were the *Anlass* (trigger) and the *Ursache* (underlying reason) for this breakdown of decades-long relative peace along the 3,488 km India–China LAC in the Himalayas? How should India react? And what does the Himalayan clash mean for US strategy?

The *Anlass* (Trigger): Strategic Highway Politics

China was busy for decades building roads, railways, and other infrastructure in its far west, in Tibet and Xinjiang. Two of its highways straddle South Asia. Its Xinjiang–Tibet Highway G219 runs through the disputed Aksai Chin region of Ladakh. China's other strategic road, the Karakoram Highway in the far west, is expected to play a major role in the 62 billion USD China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The CPEC connects China's Kashgar in Xinjiang province to Pakistan's Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea. It would enable China to haul its seaborne imports, especially oil, thereby circumventing the Strait of Malacca. Time and money would be significantly spared.

New Delhi, on the other hand, had for decades refrained from building border roads. Following the debacle in 1962, New Delhi feared that an invading PLA force would make use of any roads India built near the LAC. From 2008, however, this policy reversed. India belatedly got busy with building roads near the LAC.² Since 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's nationalist government stepped up these activities.

India's strategic DS–DBO Road in Ladakh runs 255 kilometers from Darbuk-Shyok to Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO), which is about 18 kilometers south of China's strategic Karakoram Pass. The road and 37 bailey bridges running parallel to the LAC would immensely facilitate the movement of troops and supplies to the strategic north Ladakh, the up to 18,000-foot-high Sub-Sector North (SSN).

The SSN is precariously perched between Pakistan-controlled Gilgit-Baltistan in the west and China-controlled regions of Shaksgam in the north and Aksai Chin in the east. Surrounded by these potentially hostile regions, India controls the Saltoro Ridge, the Siachen glacier further east, and the advanced landing ground (ALG) of DBO in altitudes where breathing itself is a luxury. The ALG operates AN-32s and US-supplied C-130 J Hercules aircraft. Feeder roads to the LAC are also being built.

The Galwan Valley provides direct access to Aksai Chin from India. Since the DS-DBO Road and a bridge across the Galwan *nallah* (riverbed) would mean swift access to it, China opposes such construction.

Beijing feels free to build roads in undemarcated areas but objects when India does the same. There is also Beijing's trepidation that India's military presence in north Ladakh poses a threat to China's two major highways on either side.

The PLA has now dug in. The ridges in the Galwan Valley overlook India's road. This means the PLA can cut off the road, and thereby the SSN, at will.

The Galwan River flows mostly in Aksai Chin. However, its last few kilometers west where it meets the Shyok River are in Indian territory.³ China is now unhesitatingly claiming the entire valley.⁴

The *Ursache* (Underlying Cause)

China vehemently opposed New Delhi's 5 August 2019 revision of Article 370 of India's constitution. This article—along with article 35A—had conferred a special status to India's state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), which included Ladakh. India's ruling nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) party converted J&K and Ladakh into two separate Union Territories under direct central government rule. In Beijing's view, this altered status affected the Sino-Indian LAC, which stands undelineated and undemarcated.⁵ This, along with India's road-building activities near the LAC, was seen as provocation.

The Strategic Situation

A study by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, suggests that the current Sino-Indian LAC clash was seasonal.⁶ However, this research misses the point that this time the situation is different.⁷ China has started to lay claim to the entire Galwan Valley and other points along the LAC. There were several near-simultaneous intrusions in Ladakh and in Sikkim (at Naku La) during May-June. With these moves, China has seized the first-move advantage, occupied fresh territories along the LAC, and placed India in the uncomfortable

position of having to choose its countermove to a *fait accompli* created by a powerful adversary.

PLA Forces in Tibet

A formidable PLA force stares India in the face. China's Western Theatre Command (WTC), the largest of the reorganized five regional commands, is responsible for the LAC bordering China's provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet. The Tibet Military Command/Military District under the WTC has been elevated and placed under the PLA army.⁸

The Tibet Autonomous Region has more than 200,000 soldiers, including those from support services, border guards, and armed police. The PLA has created a viable military ecosystem and has been conducting combat training.⁹

Two new commands have appeared. The Strategic Rocket Force, formerly the army's Second Artillery Corps, handles both nuclear and conventional missiles. The Strategic Support Force (SSF) specializes in electronic and cyberspace warfare as well as psychological operations. The SSF can threaten India's vital infrastructure. Chinese components in India's government and private telecom hardware, including the omnipresent microchip, also make them vulnerable.

Since even America is wary of Beijing's perceived challenge,¹⁰ would it not be foolhardy of India to provoke Beijing? This is precisely what China is counting upon. It has reminded India of the 1962 debacle, should New Delhi again try to test China's patience.¹¹

The Confronting Forces at the LAC

However, India today is better prepared than it was in 1962. India's military has been beefing up the LAC with armor, artillery, infantry, and airpower. It has several army corps deployed in the border states of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Ladakh. The XIV Corps is responsible for Ladakh's defense. There is an infantry brigade stationed at DBO; an armored brigade is deployed near Leh. A new XVII Mountain Strike Corps, (the *Brahmastra* Corps), with headquarters in Panagarh in India's eastern state of West Bengal, is probably still shaping up. It commands two divisions and a brigade. The corps is meant to be an offensive unit with the ability to move, deploy, and launch limited offensives in the mountains.¹²

In terms of airpower, both sides have many air bases and landing strips. China has several times more combat aircraft than India. However, China's disadvantage is that most of its air bases are located on the high Tibetan plateau, such as at Ngari Gunsa, which is just 200 km from the disputed Pangong Tso lake. The

rarified air at these high-altitude airfields does not permit the kind of aircraft load that India's lower altitude bases can handle. Also, Beijing's main strategic concern (*Schwerpunkt*) is in its east. Thus, India can put up a good fight despite its numerically inferior airpower.¹³

The PLA and Pakistani air forces have been regularly conducting joint exercises like the *Shaheen* and *Warrior* series. Some of these exercises take place in China's Hotan prefecture near the LAC.¹⁴ Among the participating aircraft are the reliable but not state-of-the-art single-seater JF-17 combat jet,¹⁵ jointly developed by Pakistan and China. The JF-17 is Pakistan's workhorse. Additionally, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) has the Chengdu F-7, the French Mirage III and 5, and the US F-16.¹⁶ The PAF also has a number of European and Chinese early warning and electronic warfare aircraft.

The J-10 and J-11 form the backbone of the PLA Air Force (PLAAF). Besides having the versatile J-16, the PLAAF has the latest J-10 C, equipped with the AESA radar system that allows for stealth and jam resistance. The PLAAF possesses a number of other combat aircraft, often copied from Soviet-era MiGs and Sukhois but then updated indigenously. The latest advanced jet fighter in the PLAAF is the J-20.¹⁷

Shortly after the *Shaheen 8* exercise in fall 2019, India's XVII Corps launched its *Him Vijay* exercise. India's air force inventory of combat aircraft includes the Mirage-2000; state-of-the-art and stealth Rafale, which are in the pipeline; Su-30MKI; MiG-29; the HAL *Tejas* light combat aircraft that is now replacing the veteran MiG-21; and upgraded MiG-27 and Jaguar.¹⁸

On the ground the PLA has an edge with its Type 15 light tanks, which are better suited for high altitudes than India's T-72s and T-90s.

India's Next Move: Strike Back!

Bilateral talks at various levels, from foreign ministers to corps commanders, so far have failed to make the Chinese agree to revert to *status quo ante* (April). After marathon talks, the PLA has made a few cosmetic moves, agreeing to pull back troops—on a mutual basis—a few kilometers at some spots. Critics allege the buffer zones thus created would be on India's territory.

Beijing has refused to budge from the Depsang Valley near India's DBO airstrip, or from the Finger 4 area—hitherto patrolled by both sides—on the northern bank of the Pangong Tso lake.¹⁹ The PLA's "pull back" in Galwan is also suspect. As in the past, the PLA keeps nibbling at Indian territory to create new "facts on the ground," a "new normal." It seizes an area, asserts that it has always been a part of China's territory, and then offers to negotiate.²⁰

India's Options

India now faces the dilemma of how to force the PLA to roll back without triggering a full-scale war. To carry out a *tit-for-tat*, India could swiftly move into Chinese-held territory along the long LAC with plenty of salient features.²¹ Its XVII Mountain Strike Corps finds its *raison d'être* precisely in *offensive* activity. India could then use the newly captured promontories as a bargaining chip to get the PLA out of its new posts along the LAC.

A nonkinetic and better alternative is for India to pinch, if not punch, China's underbelly in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). India should hold naval exercises like the Malabar series (with the United States and Japan), with the third Quad member, Australia, and ASEAN states near the regions that are China's Achilles' heel. These regions are the Strait of Malacca, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, and Gwadar.

China is the world's top crude oil importer. Some 80 percent of this and some liquefied natural gas move through the Malacca Strait.²² Kyaukpyu is an oil, gas, and railway terminal connecting China's Kunming in the Yunnan province.²³ Gwadar takes the cake in shortening China's sea lines of communication (SLOC), as already noted.

Exercises in these regions would force a detour of China's SLOCs and push up the time and cost of its seaborne trade. The Indian navy is already engaged in countering China's "string of pearls" strategy. The latter involves surrounding India with military and economic relationships with other littorals.

India's only triservice Andaman and Nicobar Command is strategically located at the mouth of the Malacca Strait. New Delhi is beefing it up. Additionally, New Delhi has struck naval access agreements with a host of IOR/Persian Gulf littorals as well as with the United States, France, and Australia.²⁴

To pinch China further, India could encourage the Tibetans (their revered leader, the Dalai Lama, is a refugee in India), the Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang, and people in Hong Kong and Taiwan to assert their freedom in international fora.

Key US Role

The current Sino-US Cold War works out to New Delhi's advantage. India's "strategic partnership" with the United States will come in handy in a scenario where India seizes the initiative. Washington has long perceived India as a potential bulwark against an expansionist China that aims to dominate not only Asia but also eventually Mackinder's "world island" (Africa and Eurasia),²⁵ particularly through its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. To quote a Congressional Research Service report from way back in 2013:

Concerns about an increasingly assertive or even aggressive China appear to have led American friends in the region [South Asia] to issue new calls for a greater US security role there. In Washington, DC, India's rapidly growing military capabilities tend to be viewed by American officials and analysts as providing at least a partial hedge against the emergence of any new hegemonic power on the Asian continent.²⁶

The conclusion, drawn seven years ago, rings highly relevant today:

Chinese “blunderings” in recent years—mainly what were viewed as a series of ham-fisted policies toward neighbors with whom Beijing has territorial disputes—have had the effect of pushing Washington and New Delhi into closer relations, perhaps overriding other concerns.

Global Times recently expressed China's wariness: India should not “believe that worsening China-US ties would provide a chance for India to challenge China.”²⁷

Apart from receiving advanced weapons under existing agreements and possible intelligence on PLA deployments,²⁸ India can ask Washington to conspicuously frown upon any adventurous and opportunistic tendencies of Islamabad. That approach should neutralize much of India's two-front worries.

In addition, Washington could serve to distract Beijing in the South China Sea or the Taiwan Straits region. Two aircraft carriers from Honolulu's Indo-Pacific Command, accompanied by their escorts, have already patrolled in the South China Sea. A long-range B-52 Stratofortress bomber joined them.²⁹ This double-carrier exercise came after many years in the region much to Beijing's dismay.

Southeast Asian littorals, Australia, and Japan are actively joining in the fray as well. Last June, ASEAN leaders, led by Hanoi, declared the 1982 UN oceans treaty as applicable in the South China Sea. This declaration was their strong demonstration of opposing China's claim to virtually the entire disputed waters.³⁰

In nine months of 2019, Japan's air force intercepted Chinese planes 523 times. Tokyo has also stepped up Japan's defense preparedness.³¹ Australia declared that it was to buy long-range missiles. While listing several regional disputes involving Beijing, Prime Minister Scott Morrison took care to mention its Himalayan border conflict with India.³²

Leading senators and other US government officials have been openly critical of China on a host of issues, including its border clash with India.³³ The United States, India's key partner opposing Beijing's irredentism, is already helping its army with ultra-light M-777 mountain howitzers with precision-guided Excalibur munitions and heavy-lift Chinook and Apache attack helicopters. Washington is also extending help to India's navy with P8I long-range, antisubmarine, sea patrol aircraft, drones, and the CENTRIXS communication system.³⁴ It can also

aid India with high-tech signals and electronic intelligence from its National Security Agency.³⁵

It is time that New Delhi delivers the unmistakable message to Beijing that China's salami-slicing tactics for territorial acquisitions will no longer work. In this, India will enjoy the active or tacit support of several other states around the South China Sea because Beijing simply tramples underfoot their claims on that water body.

China understands a message only if backed by strength. When faced with toughness, China retreats, as it did after a short border skirmish with the Soviet Union on the Far Eastern Ussuri River in 1969 or with Vietnam 10 years later. For all their rhetoric, the communist Chinese have not dared to invade Taiwan, which enjoys the protection of the United States.

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Dr. Jyotirmoy Banerjee, ex-professor of international relations, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India, has more than four decades of academic experience, including frequent research and teaching stints in Germany, Poland, and the United States. Besides winning Fulbright, Goethe Institute, and Alexander von Humboldt Fellowships several times, he held Rockefeller, Erasmus Mundus, and UGC Research Fellowships. Banerjee serves on various academic boards, presented papers in seminars in India, Europe, and the United States, notably at the Slavic Studies World Congresses in Washington, DC (1985), and Honolulu (1993). A frequent TV commentator, he has authored several books and scholarly articles. Professor Banerjee is fluent in German and has working knowledge of Russian and Dutch in addition to English, Bengali, and Hindi. He autodidactically built websites for his students. At reunions he rocked a la Elvis Presley, backed by his students.

Notes

1. The Line of Actual Control is neither delineated nor demarcated. It is purely perception-based. The use of firearms has been prohibited for border patrols as both sides fear escalation.
2. Anurag Kotoky and, N. C. Bipindra, "After decades Decades of Neglect, India Builds Roads along China Border," *India Times*, accessed 22 June 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>.
3. Ananth Krishnan, "The Hindu Explains: Who Does Galwan Valley Belong to?," *The Hindu*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.
4. Pranab Dhal Samanta, "View: How to get Chinese to Vacate Galwan is India's Main Challenge," *India Times*, 19 June 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/>.
5. China's Foreign Ministry's statement, 8 June 2019, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>.
6. Henry Boyd and Meia Nouwens, "Military Build-Up on the China-India Border," *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/>.
7. Sushant Singh, "Experts Explain: What Triggered China's Line of Actual Control (LAC) Moves?," *Indian Express*, 16 June 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/>.
8. Most provincial-level military districts are under the National Defense Mobilization Department of the CMC with responsibility for reserves, militia and conscription. See John Pike, "National Defense Mobilization Department," *Global Security*, accessed 22 July 2020, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/>.
9. Liu Xuanzun, "PLA Tibet Military Command Holds Nighttime High-Altitude Drills," *Global Times*, 2 June 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>; and Pravin Sawhney, "All's Not Well for India," *The Wire*, 10 June 2020, <https://thewire.in/>.
10. Congressional Research Service, "Conflict at the China-India Frontier," 17 June 2020, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.
11. Arun Joshi, "Chinese now Media Urges India Not to Equate Beijing with Pakistan," *The Tribune*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/>.
12. StratNewsGlobal, "2020 is not 1962; How Ready is India to Take on Chinese Aggression," *YouTube* video, 30 May 2020, 16:11, <https://www.youtube.com/>. There is also an independent brigade in Siachen, but this has nothing to do with Indian deployments in eastern Ladakh at the moment. The XVII Mountain Strike Corps pitted three Integrated Battle Groups (IBGs, each with a little more than 4,000 troops drawn from different combat forces) against other units in a mock battle. Nitin A. Gokhale, "Mountain Strike Corps Starts Testing New Concept," *Bharat Shakti*, 3 October 2019, <https://bharatshakti.in/>. According to Indian media, its second division at Pathankot was not completed due to lack of funds. See Sushant Singh, "Explained: What Happened to the Mountain Strike Corps?," *Indian Express*, 19 June 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/>.
13. "Since the 1990s, China constructed on a large-scale dual-use and military airfields across the Tibetan Plateau and the Western provinces, spanning the Chengdu and Lanzhou Military Regions (Tibet proper falls across the boundaries of these two MRs). It built airfields in Chengdu MR, north of Burma and inside Burma under the umbrella of military aid. The specific strategic aims are containment of India in the West, and the "Second Island Chain" strategy in the Southern and Eastern provinces." See Dr. Carlo Kopp, People's Liberation Army Air Force and Naval Air Arm, Air Base Infrastructure Technical Report APA-TR-2007-0103, 3 April 2012, <https://www.ausairpower.net/>. On India's air force, "PLAAF does have four times the number of fighters and bomber as compared to IAF, but what will operationally matter is the actual number they can 'throw at us.'" China's main worry is to its east. Rajat Pandit, "IAF Watching Chinese Bases, Sure of Matching Air Power," *India Times*, 28 June 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>.

14. “Pakistan, China Engage in Joint Air Force Exercise 300 km North of Leh: All You Need to Know about Shaheen VIII Military Exercise,” *Firstpost*, 27 August 2019, <https://www.firstpost.com/>.

15. Liu Xuanzun, “Upgraded JF-17 Fighter Jet Makes Maiden Flight, Equipped with J-20 Tech: Report,” *Global Times*, 1 January 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>. JF-17 Block 3, upgraded with many off-the-shelf technologies from China’s top-notch J-20, will enter Pakistan’s air force.

16. Pakistan’s F-16s are supposed to be used only in counter-terror operations.

17. Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power* 2019, <https://www.dia.mil/>.

18. Arjit Garg, “Now That India Has Rafale, A Look at the Existing Fighter Jet Fleet of the Indian Air Force,” *News 18*, 8 October 2019, <https://www.news18.com/>; and “Why Rafale Jets Are Important for Indian Air Force,” *India Today*, 8 October 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/>.

19. There are eight “fingers” or mountain spurs, on the north bank of the lake. China refuses to back off from Finger 4 area in Ladakh, India increases deployment of tanks near LAC. “China Refuses to Back off from Finger 4 Area in Ladakh: India Increases Deployment near LAC,” *Zee News*, 16 July 2020, <https://zeenews.india.com/>. See also Nirupama Subramanian, “Explained: The Strategic Road to DBO,” *The Telegraph*, 16 June 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/>.

20. Manoj Joshi, “Making Sense of the Depsang Incursion,” *The Hindu*, 8 June 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.

21. “America’s Asia Expert Dr Ashley Tellis Exclusive on Ladakh Standoff,” Newstrack with Rahul Kanwal, *India Today*, YouTube video, 28 May 2020, 25:44, <https://www.youtube.com/>. Tellis recommends India’s tit-for-tat policy along the Himalayan salients.

22. Chu Daye, “China Raises Alert for Malacca Strait as Regional Tensions Threaten Global Shipping Lines,” *Global Times*, 4 July 2019. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/>. 44.8 percent of China’s imported crude oil originates from nine Middle Eastern nations. See CIA, “Today in Energy,” <https://www.eia.gov/>; and Daniel Workman, “Top 15 Crude Oil Suppliers to China,” 11 July 2020, <http://www.worldstopexports.com/>.

23. Gregory Poling, “Kyaukpyu: Connecting China to the Indian Ocean, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 4 April 2018, <https://amti.csis.org/>.

24. The Information Fusion Centre—Indian Ocean Region at Gurugram, India, keeps a close watch on the movement of ships in the gulf region. Catherine Austin, “Indian Navy Increases Presence in Gulf of Oman Following Tanker Attacks,” 21 June 2019, <https://safetyatsea.net/>; and David Brewster, “Indian Ocean Base Race: India Responds,” 15 February 2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/>.

25. Geopolitician Sir Halford Mackinder had proposed at the beginning of the last century that whoever controlled the “Heartland,” meaning Asiatic plains, controlled the “World Island” (Afro-Eurasia) and thereby the world.

26. CRS, “U.S.-India Security Relations: Strategic Issues,” *CRS Reports*, 24 January 2013, 38, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

27. Quoted in Bertil Lintner, “China Shoots Itself in the Foot in the Himalayas,” *Asia Times*, 18 June 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/>.

28. Indo-US defense agreements include the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement, Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, and Defense Technology and Trade Initiative. See note 35 on intelligence sharing.

29. “US Redeployment of B-52H in Guam a Blatant Show of Muscle: Expert,” *Global Times*, 7 July 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/>. The exercise involved two strike groups with the nuclear-powered aircraft carriers *USS Nimitz* and *USS Ronald Reagan*. China expressed its resentment at the exercise.

30. Reference is to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. “ASEAN Leaders Cite 1982 UN Treaty in South China Sea Dispute,” *The Guardian*, 27 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

31. Jay Pandya, “Japan Deploys Ballistic Missiles at China-facing Border After Land-grab Clash With India,” *Republic World*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.republicworld.com/>; Oki Nagai, “Beijing Keeps Japan Busy Scrambling Jets in East China Sea,” 30 January 2020, *Nikkei Asian Review*, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>; and Yoshihiro Inaba, “Japan’s ATLA Developing Hypersonic Anti-Ship Missile,” *Naval News*, 27 April 2020, <https://www.navalnews.com/>.

32. Ben Westcott, “Australia Announces \$186 billion in Defense Spending amid Rising Tensions in the Indo-Pacific,” 1 July 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/>.

33. Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell, Senators Marco Rubio and Tom Cotton, FBI Director Christopher Wray, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, besides President Trump himself, have accused China of aggressive policy. See PTI, “Top US Senators Slam China’s Unwarranted Armed Aggression against India,” *The Week*, 30 June 2020, <https://www.theweek.in/>; and PTI, “Ladakh Face-off: US Senators Express Solidarity with India,” *The Hindu*, 30 June 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/>.

34. The Combined Enterprise Regional Information Exchange System (CENTRIX) is a reliable system that allows combined forces to communicate through secure channels and share information in a tactical, real-time setting. The Indian Navy headquarters now have two Pacific-fleet-provided CENTRIXS kits. Riyaz ul Khaliq, “US to Supply India 4 Anti-Submarine Aircraft from May,” *Americas-Asia-Pacific*, 18 March 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/>.

35. India has been a member of the NSA’s 10-member SIGINT Seniors Pacific since 2008. Although this platform is meant to be counter-terror, India’s NSA ties can be extended to strategic intelligence as well. Sanjib Kr Baruah, “India Joined US-Led Top-Secret Alliance in 2008,” *Asian Age*, 10 March 2018, <https://www.asianage.com/>.