Sticks and Stones

Nuclear Deterrence and Conventional Conflict

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On the night of 15 June 2020, Sino-Indian tensions flared into fighting along the disputed border in the region known as the Galwan Valley. The fighting led to the first casualties along the border in 45 years. However, no one on either side fired a single shot.[1] Instead, soldiers threw rocks and used wooden clubs wrapped in barbed wire to attack one another. Two of the most powerful armies in the world, both of which possess nuclear weapons, clashed with one another using sticks and stones.

Nuclear weapons prevent nuclear states from engaging in large-scale conventional war with one another, or at least, the existence of such advanced weapons has correlated with a significant decrease in conventional war between nuclear-armed adversaries over the past 80 years. Nuclear weapons tend to make nuclear adversaries wearier of engaging in conventional warfare with one another because they fear inadvertent escalation: that a war will spiral out of control and end in a nuclear exchange even if the war's aims were originally fairly limited. However, this fear has not fully prevented the Chinese and Indian militaries from engaging in skirmishes, like the one that occurred in June 2020. Where does escalation toward nuclear war start, and what does this conflict teach both us and major world players about the dangers and opportunities associated with low levels of conflict between nuclear powers?

Escalation to nuclear use may occur as a deliberate and premeditated choice or inadvertently as the result of a security dilemma, the offensive nature of militaries, and/or due to the fog of war.[2] This article argues that the Sino-Indian border dispute demonstrates that the drivers of inadvertent escalation may be present even at exceptionally low levels of conflict. Thus, even though nuclear weapons induce caution, there are good reasons to worry about the dangers of inadvertent escalation to nuclear use despite the longstanding global tradition of nonuse.

This article examines the background of the disputed border, then explores the connection between conventional and nuclear conflict in the context of this case. It considers why the conventional-nuclear escalation ladder is becoming more—not less—critical as we move farther away from the Cold War. Finally, the article considers the implications for other nuclear-armed states.

Acute Contestation over Actual Control

Over the past year, tensions between China and India have risen steadily over a disputed border in the Ladakh region, which is high in the Himalayan Mountains.[3] Both states see the other as trying to change the status quo along the border. Policy changes have become a rising issue between the two states. In fall 2019, India brought its portion of the Ladakh region under national rule.[4] Meanwhile, China has increased ties with Pakistan in recent months as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, including infrastructure projects that extend through Indo-Pakistani disputed territory.[5] Beijing and New Delhi have also begun infrastructure projects in the contested area: India recently completed a road along the border, which would allow it to move troops and materiel more quickly in the region, while China moved a large amount of heavy equipment and military sustainment supplies into the territory.[6] Rising tensions initially flared in early May, causing both states to send additional troops to the area. While India and China did enter into negotiations, progress was slow and prone to stalls, as each side questioned the motives of the other.[7] Meanwhile, tensions along the border continued to rise, crescendoing in the June 2020 skirmish.

Friction along the border is not just a contemporary problem. The 2,200-km border has been a source of tension between the two regional powers since the British colonial government in India signed a treaty with Tibet that established the McMahon Line, which functions as the official legal border between India and China. China contests the 1914 treaty, claiming that Tibet, as a non-independent entity, was not legally capable of signing such an agreement.

Today, the de facto border is known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The LAC is not demarcated and is the product of wars in 1962 and 1967.[8] The resulting line is flanked on both sides by contested territory. The Aksai Chin plateau, the location of the Galwan Valley where the fighting occurred, is claimed by India but occupied by China.[9] Both sides see the territory as economically and militarily important.[10] For China, this territory not only borders the Tibetan region of China, a region that has long sought autonomy, but also contains Highway 219, which connects Tibet with Xinjiang Province, home of the Uighurs.[11] Maintaining control over this territory and Highway 219 is strategically important to China, which has recently worked to strengthen its hold on non-Han populated areas within its borders. For India, this region is home to Daulat Beg Oldi, India's northernmost military base and the highest altitude airstrip in the world. Over the past 20 years, India has built an all-weather road, the Darbuk–Shyok–Daulat Beg Oldi (DSDBO), which connects the remote base to the regional capital of Leh. With its completion, India can now supply men and materiel much faster

and more efficiently.[12] The logistical improvement allows India a better foothold in an area full of disputed borders.[13]

While neither side experienced casualties between 1967 and 2020, the two militaries did not steer completely clear of one another. In 1987, India and China narrowly avoided a crisis when Indian troops engaging in a military exercise spooked Chinese commanders who began advancing toward the LAC. As both China and India are nuclear-capable states, they have an incentive to avoid situations that might lead to a nuclear exchange, including conventional conflict. India and China were so alarmed by the 1987 crisis that they spent the next 25 years signing resolutions to try to avoid warfare.

In 1993, India and China signed an agreement to mitigate such crisis potential in the future by increasing transparency.[14] An agreement signed in 1996 enhanced the 1993 pact, and added the stipulation that neither side would use guns or other explosives within two kilometers of the border.[15] A final agreement was signed in 2013 to create clearer understanding of appropriate defensive measures, after both sides established fortified bases within 1,000 feet of one another.[16] While these agreements were largely successful in preventing conventional conflict, small incursions and provocations did occur, as the June 2020 skirmish demonstrates.

What makes the most recent clash interesting is that this is the first time the two states have suffered casualties while both were nuclear armed.[17] Any time two nuclear-armed states engage militarily, the risk of escalation to nuclear use lurks in the shadows.

From Sticks and Stones to Armageddon?

Some might argue that the existence of nuclear weapons would preclude the risk and danger of large-scale conventional conflict along the Sino-Indian border.[18] Typically, states prefer to solve their differences using conventional threats and actions, operating at the very lowest levels of Herman Kahn's escalation ladder, a "useful metaphor" for how conventional and nuclear warfare operate within a continuum.[19] It is rare for states to issue nuclear threats,[20] and a longstanding tradition of nuclear nonuse has existed for the past 80 years. If this tradition of nonuse holds, we should expect China and India to double down on the transparency agreements they began in the 1990s. And yet, regardless of the weapons available, the pressures associated with maintaining the status quo overcame the effect of nuclear deterrence on conventional warfare.[21] Despite not having guns or explosives, a clash emerged, and military personnel were killed.

Thus, while it is certainly true that nuclear weapons can induce a level of caution among nuclear-armed states in their dealings with one another, nuclear weapons in and of themselves are not a fool proof solution. The risk of inadvertent

escalation, or a conventional conflict that unintentionally becomes nuclear is ever present, even from relatively low levels of conflict like the June skirmish. In his influential work *Inadvertent Escalation*, Barry Posen presents three potential mechanisms that could lead to inadvertent escalation: the security dilemma, the inherently offensive nature of military organizations, and the fog of war. All three mechanisms can be found operating in the Sino-Indian border dispute.

First, the security dilemma may cause inadvertent escalation due to the lack of information about adversary capabilities and intentions. States that perceive an adversary has increased its offensive potential are likely to assume the worst and attempt to compensate, but a lack of information can drive spirals of military hostility and build up. The inadvertent nature of the security dilemma may cause states to unintentionally threaten one another at the nuclear level. It bears mention that both India and China have declared "no-first-use" policies that, in theory, should prevent a security dilemma from spiraling toward the nuclear level because they promise that neither state will resort to nuclear use unless they are attacked first.[22] However, as nuclear forces are considered assets of the upmost value, conventional action that accidently targets or threatens another states' nuclear forces would be seen as malign and in need of a more violent response.[23] In short, states may inadvertently escalate to nuclear use when facing another nuclear state because they see doing so as a defensive action against a perceived nuclear threat.

On the Sino-Indian border, there is already evidence of a security dilemma at work, despite Chinese and Indian recognition of the risk.[24] India's completion of the DSDBO gave India the ability to quickly mass troops in the disputed area. In response, China dug trenches, pitched tents, and moved heavy equipment closer to the LAC and into the area that New Delhi regards as Indian territory. In response, India's Ministry of Defense authorized a fighter jet purchase to "strengthen the armed forces in defense of [its] borders."[25] These large moves have been complemented by a supposed series of smaller moves,[26] including Indian troops allegedly crossing the border and carrying out provocative attacks, and China purportedly moving to occupy multiple areas that it had not previously controlled.[27] If interactions between Chinese and Indian troops increase, and if both states increase the scale of their response, more opportunities for inadvertent escalation emerge.[28] As Posen notes, even conventional actions taken in defense may produce an offensive threat against an adversary's nuclear forces.[29]

The second mechanism driving inadvertent escalation is the inherently offensive nature of militaries, which biases the organization toward offensive actions and/or plans that cause or require confrontation between conventional and nuclear forces.[30] In conventional terms, wars are most easily won (or deterred) by a successful (or probability of a successful) fait accompli: overwhelming and/or con-

centrated force at a particular point that allows a military to quickly gain and hold a strategic advantage (usually territory).[31] The swiftness of the seizure and establishment of a new status quo makes it extremely difficult to reverse such gains, particularly when the capturing state is able to hide behind a nuclear shield. Such action can lead to inadvertent escalation in two ways. First, if the attacked state wants to return to the status quo ante, it must first risk a more intense conflict as a result of its counterattack, and larger conventional conflicts are more prone to the dangers of inadvertent escalation. Second, when conventional and nuclear forces are colocated, conventional offensive actions can cause militaries to threaten the nuclear forces of the adversary—sparking nuclear war.[32]

In this case, China's movement of heavy equipment in early May is being hailed as a fait accompli that India will be hard pressed to reverse.[33] If India wants to reestablish the status quo ante, New Delhi may consider going on the offensive, increasing the probability of larger scale conventional conflict and, thus, the risk of inadvertent escalation to nuclear use. Should China choose to meet India's offense and push back across the LAC, Beijing, too, risks inadvertent nuclear escalation. In sum, if China's offensive fait accompli strategy unleashes a larger conventional conflict, the associated offensive military actions may cause contact between conventional and nuclear forces, resulting in an inadvertent escalation.

The fog of war is the third mechanism that may lead to inadvertent escalation. The uncertainty and inertia of ongoing military operations can create intense escalatory pressures, as fears surrounding an adversary's potential for successful surprise attacks and the status of their nuclear capabilities enter planners' calculus.[34] In addition, the more uncertain decision makers are about the status of the adversaries' nuclear forces, the more pressure they will feel to escalate the conflict.

Indian prime minister Narendra Modi has vacillated between promising that the military will defend the Indian border and claiming that there was no incursion. Meanwhile, Beijing has remained relatively tight-lipped about the incident, refusing to even comment on Chinese casualties.[35] Reports from the border emphasize the harsh conditions that soldiers face, including adverse health effects that can negatively impact soldiers' perceptions of what is occurring.[36] If the two sides cannot increase transparency through diplomatic talks, which at the time of this writing have not been fruitful, then tensions are likely to continue rising both along the border and in Beijing and New Delhi.[37] As a result, escalatory pressure may increase and with it the risk of inadvertent escalation to nuclear use.

In short, the Sino-Indian case is already plagued by the latent causes of inadvertent escalation. Such problems at the subconventional level demonstrate a clear potential to shift into an inadvertent escalation toward a nuclear exchange should the two states increase the intensity of their conventional conflict.

Lessons Learned

While the nuclear shadow looms large over the Sino-Indian border, the June 2020 skirmish offers lessons about how nuclear powers engage conventionally. In particular, the conflict offers lessons for China's playbook, India's playbook, and the utility of different nuclear postures.

China's Playbook and Implications for Other Irredentist Powers

The June 2020 skirmish and resulting aftermath affirm China's fait accompli strategy. In recent years, China has begun to test the feasibility of small-scale fait accompli tactics in disputed regions like the South China Sea. This latest dustup verified China's ability to chip away at disputed territory conventionally without the fear of a larger confrontation, even when the dispute was against a nuclear-armed state. As analysts note, India is unlikely to push to a return to the status quo ante.[38] The confirmation of the strategy's success makes China more likely to pursue it again and against other adversaries—a dangerous proposition.

China's nuclear modernization, increased military spending, and work toward improving relations with states like Pakistan antagonize other regional powers like India. Combined with China's predilection for holding its cards close to its chest[39] and small-scale, offensively oriented fait accompli strategies, the risk of a security dilemma spiraling toward nuclear war intensifies. Specifically, if the security dilemma grows and either India or China considered a true attack against the other, they would need to mass and move a far greater number of troops due to their relative parity. Conflict at that scale when combined with the fog-of-war issues discussed above, would create a situation ripe for inadvertent escalation. In other words, by affirming China's strategy, this skirmish has at least the potential of kicking off a conflict farther up the escalation ladder than we have seen previously.

Irredentist and revanchist states will watch the continued dispute between China and India with interest.[40] If China's strategy continues to bear fruit, other revisionist offenses, like Russia's annexation of Crimea, will gain a further strategic endorsement. In other words, revisionist states will see that small-scale conventional faits accomplis work, including against nuclear rivals, and such states may be more inclined to use that strategy themselves.

India's Playbook and Implications for Others Facing a Revisionist State

In previous border skirmishes with China, India has pursued "quiet diplomacy" or downplayed public rhetoric, coupled with a strong military stance.[41] In this instance, India faces a few problems with this tack. First, while India and China did begin diplomatic talks to attempt to ease the tension, it has not quickly

led to decreased tensions. Rather, New Delhi and Beijing are now accusing the other of firing warning shots and breaking the long-standing agreement to forego the use of firearms along the border.[42] Second, the success of China's fait accompli strategy means that India must either accept the new status quo or seriously consider directly or indirectly expelling China through military force or economic coercion, respectively.[43] India has begun to take steps toward creating indirect leverage, by banning some Chinese technology; [44] however, the efficacy of this move remains to be seen.

States that face similar challenges from revisionist states will see that India's quiet diplomatic strategy has thus far not prevented China from altering the status quo nor has it meaningfully lowered tensions. Thus, states facing similar threats may be more likely to immediately attempt direct or indirect methods of preventing or reversing faits accomplis. India's secondary attempt to create indirect leverage by banning Chinese technology will likewise be closely observed. If economic coercion fails to produce the necessary leverage to revert to the status quo ante, or at minimum, reverse the tensions, other states may be tempted to pursue the more aggressive military option of directly confronting nuclear-armed revisionist states and, thus, open themselves up for inadvertent escalation.

Varied Nuclear Postures

Finally, the June 2020 skirmish offers important lessons for the deterrent effect of various nuclear postures. According to Vipin Narang, there are three types of regional nuclear postures: catalytic, asymmetric escalation, and assured retaliation.[45] He argues that each posture leads to distinct likelihoods of conflict initiation and escalation due to the discrete sunk costs associated with each posture.[46]

China and India have an assured retaliation posture, which is characterized by a secure second strike and is designed to directly deter a nuclear attack. While this might suggest that states with an assured retaliation posture could engage conventionally without fear of nuclear escalation, that is not necessarily the case. Narang argues that states with assured retaliation postures will face an increase in low-intensity conventional attacks from nuclear opponents and, at best, be able to deter large-scale or high-intensity conventional attacks.[47] The question is whether the instability caused by the security dilemma and exacerbated by the fog of war will be held in check by the deterrence against high-intensity conventional attacks that China's and India's assured retaliation postures promise.

What does this teach other nuclear powers? From a deterrence perspective, assured retaliation might seem like a good choice, allowing the state to engage conventionally while deterring a nuclear adversary from engaging in large-scale

conventional attacks.[48] However, this misses an important point about the interplay between conventional and nuclear deterrence.

The issue with conventional deterrence is that it is contestable: the inability to accurately predict the outcome of a conventional threat lessens its credibility, whereas nuclear deterrence is far more credible, because it is uncontestable.[49] If a state wants to enhance its conventional deterrence capability, it must be willing to use force, for, as Robert Haffa argues, deterrence decreases when states become unwilling to use force—because their threats then become less credible.[50] Given the ability to use nuclear weapons as a shield behind which to consolidate small conventional gains, it follows that conventional deterrence when backed by nuclear deterrence becomes more credible and less contestable.

States considering how to defend themselves against small-scale conventional faits accomplis will need to pursue a different posture. A first-strike advantage gives a state the impunity to engage conventionally elsewhere without risking a territorial incursion.[51] This advantage means the state has the ability to consider taking conventional action against a nuclear power, which would enhance its conventional deterrence credibility. The inherent linkage or codependency between nuclear deterrence and credible conventional deterrence means that latter should not be considered in the absence of the former.

Conclusion

The June 2020 border conflict between China and India can give us insight into how conventional conflicts are likely to play out between nuclear adversaries in the future. There are two key takeaways from this event. First, the danger of assuming that this recent skirmish—which has not escalated at the time of this writing—will be typical of conventional conflict between nuclear-armed states is that it allows the risk of inadvertent escalation to be assumed away. While it is true that no state has used nuclear weapons in warfare since 1945, and that both China and India ascribe to a secure second-strike nuclear posture, that does not remove the inherent risk of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons exist; militaries train to use them in combat. Therefore, there exists a nonzero probability that nuclear use can occur. If policy makers begin to authorize larger-scale conventional conflicts with nuclear adversaries—to act as if the upper parts of the escalation ladder do not exist—the risk of inadvertent escalation intensifies. The more intense and widespread a conventional conflict, the more opportunities exist for an unintentional damage or threaten the adversary's nuclear forces, which could spark a nuclear response.

Second, nuclear-armed states that conduct fait accompli attacks are destabilizing and dangerous for two reasons. On the one hand, fait accompli attacks are

difficult to reverse, especially when the strategic gains are protected by a nuclear shield. As a result, states become incentivized to pursue postures that include a first-strike capability. First-strike capabilities allow states to deter even small-scale conventional incursions, because the posture threatens a nuclear response. On the other hand, a first-strike capability makes achieving a conventional fait accompli attack even easier, because it allows the revisionist state to stage the attack without fear of territorial incursion in response.

While the June 2020 skirmish on the Sino-Indian border resembled a schoolyard brawl, its impact on both the future of foreign policy in South Asia and great-power/nuclear-weapons states competition may extend farther than its scale would imply. ✪

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Notes

1. "India Now Says 20 Troops Killed in China Clash," *BBC News*, 16 June 2020, sec. Asia, https://www.bbc.com/.

2. Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks*. Reprint edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

3. Alyssa Ayres, "The China-India Border Dispute: What to Know," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 18 June 2020, https://www.cfr.org/.

4. The Ladakah region encompasses the area bordering the LAC and also Jammu & Kashmir, territory India disputes with long-time rival Pakistan. Previously, this territory was semi-autonomous from the federal government. Jin Wu and Steven Lee Myers, "Battle in the Himalayas," *New York Times*, 18 July 2020, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/; and Jeffrey Gettleman, Suhasini Raj, Kai Schultz, and Hari Kumar, "India Revokes Kashmir's Special Status, Raising Fears of Unrest," *New York Times*, 5 August 2019, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/.

5. Keegan Elmer, "China, Pakistan Push Ahead with US$6.8 Billion Rail Project in Disputed Region," *South China Morning Post*, 9 August 2020, https://www.scmp.com/.

6. Anbarasan Ethirajan and Vikas Pandey, "China and India Face off on the Roof of the World," *BBC News*, 30 May 2020, sec. Asia, https://www.bbc.com/.

7. Kunal Purohit, "Speculation Swirls over Troop Stand-Offs at India-China Border," *South China Morning Post*, 26 May 2020, https://www.scmp.com/.

8. These conflicts were the last time that either side experienced casualties. Russell Goldman, "India-China Border Dispute: A Conflict Explained," *New York Times*, 17 June 2020, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/.

9. Marcelo Duhalde, Dennis Wong and Kaliz Lee "Why Did an India-China Border Clash Turn into a Deadly Scuffle?," *South China Morning Post*, 2 July 2020, https://multimedia.scmp.com/.

10. However, the territory along the LAC in this region is inhospitable. It exists 14,000 feet above sea level, and the cold desert is characterized by steep terrain and subzero temperatures and features a fast-flowing fifty-mile-long river. Such adverse conditions and the resulting negative health effects for soldiers make it unsurprising that tensions among troops run high in the area. Health effects resulting from the altitude, low oxygen, and high ultraviolet radiation can include altitude sickness, pulmonary edema, and cerebral edema. "India-China Dispute: The Border Row Explained in 400 Words," *BBC News*, 16 June 2020, sec. Asia, https://www.bbc.com/; "A Freezing, Inhospitable Battlefield on a Mountain," *BBC News*, 17 June 2020, sec. India, https://www.bbc.com/; and Duhalde, Wong, and Lee, "Why Did an India-China Border Clash Turn into a Deadly Scuffle?"

11. While Tibet has struggled in this respect for years, China's efforts have more recently been highlighted in its Xinjiang region against the Uighurs. Jayshree Bajoria, "The Question of Tibet," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 5 December 2008, https://www.cfr.org/; Lindsay Maizland, "China's Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 30 June 2020, https://www.cfr.org/; and Wu and Myers, "Battle in the Himalayas."

12. Pratik Jakhar, "India and China Race to Build along a Tense Frontier," *BBC News*, July 30, 2020, sec. Asia, https://www.bbc.com/.

13. India also has border disputes with Pakistan in this region. Duhalde, Wong, and Lee, "Why Did an India-China Border Clash Turn into a Deadly Scuffle?"

14. "Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas," 7 September 1993, https://peacemaker.un.org/.

15. "Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas," 29 November 1996, https://peacemaker.un.org/.

16. "Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Border Defence Cooperation," 23 October 2013, https://www.mea.gov.in/; and Goldman, "India-China Border Dispute."

17. China became a nuclear power in 1964; India in 1974.

18. See for example, the argument made by Christopher Clary and Vipin Narang, who when discussing the possibility of India pursuing a direct expulsion of Chinese forces do not raise the issue of a possible nuclear confrontation, focusing instead on timing and the mountainous terrain as the main impediments. "India's Pangong Pickle: New Delhi's Options after Its Clash with China," W*ar on the Rocks*, 2 July 2020, https://warontherocks.com/.

19. In fact, a spectrum of conflict from subconventional to nuclear is how US adversaries during the Cold War thought about nuclear weapons. Robert Peters, Justin Anderson, and Harrison Menke, "Deterrence in the 21st Century: Integrating Nuclear and Conventional Force," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (2018): 15–43. Kahn separates the ladder into seven units (crisis maneuvering; traditional crises; intense crises; bizarre crises; exemplary military attacks; military central wars; and civilian central wars) that are separated by six "firebreaks" or moments within conflict escalation when, "very sharp changes in the character of escalation take place" (don't rock the boat; nuclear war is unthinkable; no nuclear use; central sanctuary; central war; and city targeting). Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*, 1 edition (New Brunswick, NJ: Routledge, 2009).

20. Such threats do occur. For example, Russia threatened Denmark in 2015. "Russia Threatens to Aim Nuclear Missiles at Denmark Ships If It Joins NATO Shield," *Reuters*, 22 March 2015, https://www.reuters.com/.

21. The phrase *nuclear deterrence* is generally used to refer to a state's reticence to use nuclear weapons against a nuclear-armed adversary out of fear of being hit with a return nuclear strike. However, nuclear weapons have a deterrent effect on conventional conflict as well. Since the advent of nuclear weapons, nuclear-weapons states have been averse to engaging in large-scale conventional conflict with one another. This reticence comes out of a fear that any large-scale conventional conflict has the potential of escalating to nuclear usage, what I refer to in this paper as *inadvertent escalation*.

22. India further qualifies this by stating that chemical and biological attacks against Indian forces or Indian territory would also be considered provocation worthy of a nuclear response. Ankit Panda, "'No First Use' and Nuclear Weapons," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 17 July 2018, https://www.cfr.org/.

23. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation*, 13–14.

24. In the past, China and India worked to decrease the threat of the security dilemma via a series of transparency improvement agreements. The most impactful was the 1996 agreement, as it bound the two states to forego the use of military force in the area and to increase transparency regarding military forces engaged in local exercises and intended to give policy makers more room for diplomatic maneuvering to avoid worsening the security dilemma.

25. Ajai Shukla, "Eye on China: India to Get Rs 38,900-Cr Defence Upgrade amid Border Dispute," *Business Standard India*, 2 July 2020, https://www.business-standard.com/.

26. Both sides accuse the other of violations and deny their own culpability.

27. Soutik Biswas, "An Extraordinary Escalation 'Using Rocks and Clubs'," *BBC News*, 16 June 2020, sec. India, https://www.bbc.com/.

28. It is possible to engage in protracted conflict on a rung of the ladder, since the escalation ladder refers to scale of violence, not number or length of skirmishes. However, the more skirmishes occur, the more opportunities there are for the scale of violence to intensify.

29. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation*, 15.

30. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation*, 16.

31. John Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); and John J. Mearsheimer, "Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence in Europe," *International Security* 9, no. 3 (Winter 1984): 19–46.

32. This is more likely to occur when nuclear forces are colocated with conventional forces or are used for conventional or nuclear purposes. Take bombers, for example, which may be used for either conventional or nuclear missions. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation*. It should also be noted that some states, like Russia, have hinted at policies that suggest they would be more likely to turn to the offensive use of nuclear weapons early in a conflict if a loss appeared inevitable (known as the "esclate-to-descalate" policy). Amy F. Woolf, *Russia's Nuclear Weapons: Doctrine, Forces, and Modernization* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 20 July 2020), https://crsreports.congress.gov/. However, this falls outside the bounds of *inadvertent escalation*, as this kind of policy is a deliberate and premeditated escalation, rather than a reactionary one.

33. Clary and Narang, "India's Pangong Pickle."

34. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation*, 22.

35. "India Now Says 20 Troops Killed in China Clash," *BBC News*, 16 June 2020, sec. Asia, https://www.bbc.com/.

36. Duhalde, Wong, and Lee, "Why Did an India-China Border Clash Turn into a Deadly Scuffle?"

37. "India Now Says 20 Troops Killed in China Clash," *BBC News*; "India's Modi Vows to Protect Borders after Clashes," *BBC News*, 19 June 19, 2020, sec. Asia, https://www.bbc.com/; and "Galwan Valley: China to Use Martial Art Trainers after India Border Clash," *BBC News*, 27 June 2020, sec. China, https://www.bbc.com/.

38. Clary and Narang, "India's Pangong Pickle."

39. Beijing's handling of the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates China's reticence in transparency with the rest of the international community. It is not unreasonable to think that such reticence would operate at a higher level within strictly military realms. "China Delayed Releasing Coronavirus Info, Frustrating WHO," *AP News*, 2 June 2020, https://apnews.com/.

40. In turn, India has begun to counter these moves by strengthening ties with the West, in particular the United States. As a fellow democracy, India has an incentive to balance with the United States against a rising China. Anik Joshi, "China Is Pushing India Closer to the United States," *Foreign Policy* (blog), 9 June 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/.

41. Clary and Narang, "India's Pangong Pickle"; and Ananth Krishnan, "A Case for Quiet Diplomacy," *The Hindu*, 12 June 2020, sec. Lead, https://www.thehindu.com/.

42. Jeffrey Gettleman, "Shots Fired Along India-China Border for First Time in Years," *New York Times*, 8 September 2020, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/.

43. Though as Clary and Narang note, neither is an appealing option given that both the military and economic balances favor China. Clary and Narang, "India's Pangong Pickle." India did make an economic coercion play in July, banning the use of some Chinese technology, "India Bans TikTok and Dozens More Chinese Apps," *BBC News*, 29 June 2020, sec. Technology, https://www.bbc.com/.

44. "India Bans TikTok and Dozens More Chinese Apps," *BBC News*.

45. A *catalytic posture* "consists of only a handful of nuclear weapons [and] threatens the explicit breakout of nuclear weapons in the event the state's survival is threatened in order to compel—or catalyze—third-party intervention on the state's behalf;" an *assured retaliation posture* consists of "secure second strike nuclear capabilities that enable a state to threaten certain nuclear retaliation should it suffer primarily a nuclear attack;" and an *asymmetric escalation posture* consists of "capabilities and procedures that credibly enable the rapid and first use of nuclear weapons in the event of a conventional attack." Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 8.

46. The sunk costs of developing tactical nuclear weapons that can be used early in a conventional conflict is both great and distinct. Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, 231.

47. Different postures allow for consideration of "the nuclear option" at different levels of conflict due to the differences in the types of forces, command-and-control procedures, and deployment patterns. Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, 232.

48. Narang does note that posture choice is determined based on optimization and considers factors such as the security environment, civil-military relations, and resource constraints. Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*, 32.

49. James J. Wirtz, "How Does Nuclear Deterrence Differ from Conventional Deterrence?," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (2018): 58–75.

50. Robert P. Haffa, "The Future of Conventional Deterrence: Strategies for Great Power Competition," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (2018): 94–115.

51. Robert Peters and company note that North Korea, Russia, and China are all unlikely to attack the US homeland "for fear that this would automatically provoke a significant US response." Peters, Anderson, and Menke, "Deterrence in the 21st Century," 15–43, 23.

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