

The Behavioral Logic behind India's Tough Foreign Policy toward China

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Abstract: Conflict between India and China at the Galwan Valley has brought their bilateral relations to the lowest point since the border war in 1962. Although this conflict appeared incidental, it in fact was the inevitable result of India's tough foreign policy featuring "high risk, high yield" pursued by the Modi administration toward China. The subsequent measures of India's tough diplomacy toward China have become more frequent, reflecting both a desire to seek revenge and a deep level of India's logic. Such logic considers not only the policy inertia of India's long-term pursuit of absolute security and dominance in the regional order, but also the intention of Modi's government to overtake China by taking advantages of India's favorable external strategic environment. The existing structural contradictions in China-India relations and the right-leaning tendencies in India's domestic political ecology have laid the groundwork for this conflict to occur and for the Modi administration to pursue a tough foreign policy toward China. This conflict has once again shown the rapid decay of the existing operational mechanism and architecture of their bilateral relations, which can no longer smooth over the complex interactions between the two major emerging neighbors. As a result, the moment has arrived for China and India to restructure their relations, otherwise their relationship can hardly be continued.

Keywords: conflict at the Galwan Valley, India-China relationship, India's tough foreign policy toward China, Modi administration

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The year 2020 has been a significant year in China-India relations, as both sides planned 70 celebration events commemorating the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties. However, the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all the arrangements, which was followed by one emergency after another in their bilateral relations, until finally the outbreak of a sanguinary conflict on the night of June 15 at the Galwan Valley, which has brought China-India relations to their lowest point since the border war between them in 1962. It was India that provoked the conflict by launching a surprise attack on the Chinese-controlled area in the middle of the night, seriously wounding Chinese border guards, while China took a posterior action to fight back, inflicting great casualties on Indian border troops. From the fact that the Indian side obviously lacked backup medical treatment after the conflict, it is most likely that the night raid was a solo adventure planned and led by Colonel Santosh Babu of the Indian Army in order to gain credit or reward. The Indian side did not dare make an open reflection on its own mistake, but instead resorted to playing the “sympathy card” and exaggerating “Chinese bullying” through internal and external media and diplomatic channels, thus giving rise to mounting public indignation across India. The international community, unaware of the truth, expressed sympathy toward India, while American politicians took the opportunity to fuel hatred against China by not only frequently attacking it for its threat, but also by publicly rendering support to India. Meanwhile, quite a few major arms trading nations have intervened, making their intentions to sell arms to India well known. With all these agitations occurring, the Modi administration has become increasingly tougher in its policy toward China, hence building up antagonism between the two countries and putting China-India relations on a downward trend. Although the border tension incited by the military conflict at the Galwan Valley has eased markedly through communications at different levels and on various platforms between China and India, the damage done to their bilateral relations will be difficult to repair. This first major large-scale border conflict with widespread casualties since 1975 indicates that the development of China-India relations has come to a structural bottleneck, and the time has arrived for the two countries to

restructure their relations, otherwise their relationship can hardly be resumed. In addition, the clash at the border has reproduced the strange phenomenon present in China-India relations since Modi came to power, namely, that every year has witnessed a benign beginning and a sad ending. This paper is intended to look into the behavioral logic behind the clash between China and India at the Galwan Valley, and India's tough foreign policy toward China before and after the conflict in hopes of drawing lessons from the past, providing a reference for the late comers, and helping with future breakthroughs in their bilateral relationship.

Pursuit of Absolute Security

The clash between China and India at the Galwan Valley constitutes a blasting fuse to a new round of military confrontation, economic decoupling and public opinion hostility between the two countries. The border dispute is just one of many problems in the bilateral relations between China and India,¹ which has always been a serious interference, especially the public opinion of both countries since they successively established their modern states.

Although the border clash at the Galwan Valley was derived from the willful and reckless actions taken by Indian border troops led by Colonel Babu, there is inevitability in contingency, as it was the inevitable result of the so-called Forward Policy persistently pursued by successive Indian governments at the border.

As a matter of fact, the Forward Policy is a strategy intended to seek unilateral changes in border controls. Since as early as the Nehru administration, New Delhi, benefitting from topographic conveniences and the inheritance of colonial legacies from the British Empire, has been implementing the Forward Policy with great fanfare, willfully revising the border line between China and India in accordance with its own security needs and repeatedly intruding into, gnawing at, and seizing areas controlled and claimed by China in order to test its bottom line of tolerance, until finally

¹ Generally speaking, Sino-Indian relations have been disturbed deeply by five "T" issues, referring to the Tibet issue, territory disputes, the third-party factor, trade unbalance and trust deficit. Different issues have different impacts on their bilateral relations at different times.

escalating into the border war in 1962. Although India lost the war and most of the achievements produced by the Forward Policy, successive Indian governments resumed this strategy as soon as China moved its troops back from the border, repeating their “sausage slicing” tactics at the border, during which several sanguinary clashes and military confrontations have occurred. Moreover, in all kinds of border negotiations between the two countries since the 1980s, New Delhi has always insisted on the actual border line established by the Forward Policy pursued by the Nehru administration.

Today, the Indian military has basically controlled most of the commanding heights along the eastern and middle section of the China-India border. Since Modi came into power, India’s border troops have focused on promoting the Forward Policy along the western section of the China-India border, which explains why events of border confrontation have basically taken place in the western section of their border during this time. In 2019 for example, India trespassed China’s line of actual control 1,581 times, of which 94 percent occurred in the western section of the China-India border. When China responded strongly, border confrontations and even clashes would ensue. Whenever border incidents happened, their bilateral relations would be affected. This is a major reason why the bilateral relations between China and India have always been caught in yearly vicious cycles of “starting high and ending low” since Modi assumed power in 2014, with the annual fluctuation in bilateral relations closely related to the annual rise and fall of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau snowline: when the snowline recedes (as a result of warmer weather), events of border confrontation will increase and bilateral relations will go down; when the snowline descends (mountain passes are closed down by heavy snow), border patrol will decrease and bilateral relations will improve.

The fundamental reason why India has been obsessed with the Forward Policy over the past decades, even at the risk of going into military confrontation or as far as starting conflict with China, lies in the fact that there has long been a myth of seeking absolute security within India’s decision-making and strategic circles. The biggest reason for India to provoke the border conflict at the Galwan Valley was because China’s

border infrastructure building activities in that region were thought to pose serious threats to the Darbuk-Shyok River-Daulat Beg Oldie highway that was just put into use this year (the Daulat Beg Oldie airport started operation October of 2019). The highway is an important strategic route for India to ensure its effective control of the Siachen Glacier, which is not only the strategic high grounds to monitor the China-Pakistan Karakoram highway, but also the world's highest battlefield where Indian and Pakistani military troops confront each other.

India's obsession with absolute border security is derived from the Scientific Frontier Scheme promoted by the British colonial empire on the Indian subcontinent since the 1850s. Its intentions were to build a safer and more defensive colonial empire, thus sowing the seeds for future border disputes between China and India, the India-Pakistan contention for Kashmir, and the Duran Line controversy between India and Afghanistan.¹ After India gained its national independence in 1947, New Delhi inherited this concept as the "natural successor to the colonial legacies of the British Empire" and practiced it consistently, which eventually led to border disputes between India and all of its neighbors, including China. Between China and India, considering all their past and present conflicts, including the border war in 1962, the shelling at Nathula in 1967, the shooting at the Toulon Pass in 1975, the military confrontation at the Sumdorong Chu from 1986 to 1987, the confrontation at Dong-lang in 2017 and the recent conflict at the Galwan Valley, they are all the disastrous consequences of India seeking a "safer, more defensive and absolutely secured border."

In fact, obsession with absolute security is typically the behavior of a zero-sum game. The absolute security of one side is bound to be the absolute insecurity of the other. As a result, China-India relations have been deeply disturbed by this security dilemma.

Impacts of Conservative Politics

As diplomacy serves domestic politics, domestic politics determines

¹ Stuart Sweeney, *Financing India's Imperial Railways (1875-1914)* (Routledge, 2011), 84.

diplomatic style. Although the border conflict is the blasting fuse of the current tension between China and India, the right-leaning tendency in India's domestic politics is the political logic behind its tough foreign policy toward China.

Since Modi came to power in 2014, the political landscape in India has become increasingly conservative. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), bearing the birthmark of Hindu nationalism, claimed landslide victories in both the 2014 and 2019 national elections, thus putting an end to three decades of a coalition government since the mid-1980s. Meanwhile, the political influence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the mother organization of the BJP, has been at its peak due to the success of the election of the BJP. The RSS is a right-wing organization that works on shaping India's social ideology with Hindu nationalism. When Modi first came to power in 2014, there were only about 40,000 shakhas throughout India, while the total number of shakhas has increased to 84,000 in 2019,¹ dominating all levels of Indian society. Although the RSS does not run in political elections, it has given its full support to the BJP and helped it to win its re-election. Particularly in the parliamentary election of 2019, the BJP won a huge victory with full grassroots support mobilized by the RSS. In some parts of India, the RSS has even steered clear of the pro-establishment camp of the BJP by nominating RSS cadres within the BJP to run successfully for election.

From the composition of the decision-making bodies of India's two recent governments, it is evident that political overtones are growing stronger. In Modi's first administration, of the 66 ministers and cabinet members, 41 were from the RSS, while of the 53 ministers from the BJP in his current government, 38 have a Rangh background.² All the important political figures, from the head of the ruling party to prime minister and to the interior and defense ministers, are from the RSS. In the two parliaments, there were almost no Muslim representatives in the BJP delegation, nor were there

¹ According to the 2019 annual report of the RSS, there are 84,877 shakhas nationwide in India, see "How Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh Is Spreading Its Footprint across the Nation," *DNA*, March 9, 2019.

² Neelam Pandey and Shanker Arnimesh, "RSS in Modi Govt in Numbers — 3 of 4 Ministers Are Rooted in the Sangh," *The Print*, January 27, 2020.

any in the delegation of the BJP's allies, hence constituting the most ethnically skewed parliaments since the founding of modern India.¹ Muslims make up 15 percent of India's total population, but their seats in the 2014 Lok Sabha were reduced to 22, accounting for only 4 percent of the total seats, the lowest since 1962. After the 2019 election, Muslim MPs increased to 27, accounting for only 5 percent of the total seats.² In comparison, of the BJP's 303 MPs in the Lok Sabha, 146, or 48 percent, have an affiliation with the RSS. In the Rajya Sabha, of its 82 MPs, the BJP has 34 with links to the Sangh, accounting for 41 percent of the total seats.³

Under the joint promotion of the BJP and right-wing groups like the RSS, the country's social and political landscape is increasingly shifting to the right. In recent years, Hindu populism has become widespread throughout India, with the traditional elites in pursuit of excluding rationality and freedom, while the new elites from the right-wing groups that identify with Hindutva and pledge loyalty to the RSS have generally risen. Obviously, the BJP, Modi, and his ruling administration have to, out of consideration for their own political interests, bear the great political influence from these right-wing groups, including the RSS, in pursuing their internal and external policies, particularly in their policies toward China.

Indian conservatives already held deep strategic mistrust and apprehension about China due to the structural problems existing between the two countries. Since Modi began his administration, the rising conservative forces have squeezed the living space of the liberal groups traditionally made up of diplomatic and business elites, and have even done away with the strategic culture of swinging between the sides of China and the US, which India had persistently adhered to beforehand. In a domestic political environment where Hindu nationalism is flourishing, coupled with an international political landscape highlighting confrontation between

¹ In the current Lok Sabha, there is not a single Muslim MP from the BJP, while there was one from the BJP in the last Lok Sabha.

² 2019 Lok Sabha election results: Only 27 Muslim MPs elected to Parliament, none from the BJP, accessed December 31, 2019, <https://scroll.in/latest/924627/2019-lok-sabha-election-results-only-24-muslim-mps-elected-to-parliament-none-from-the-bjp>.

³ Neelam Pandey and Shanker Arnimesh, "RSS in Modi Govt in Numbers — 3 of 4 Ministers Are Rooted in the Sangh."

China and the US or even the West as a whole, both speculative and risk preferences are on the rise in the Modi administration's policy toward China, which continues to be controlled by conservative forces.

Take the experience of Chinese companies investing in India as an example. The conservative forces represented by the RSS have long been opposed to all foreign investment. In the past, the Indian right-wing conservative forces used to be concerned about the control of India's market by American companies in particular, which they argued would corrupt traditional Indian values. Economic groups affiliated with the RSS had made several efforts to stop such American companies as Wal-Mart and Amazon from expanding their overseas businesses in India, and they refused to make concessions to the US in trade frictions and negotiations between the two countries. Of late, with China's investment in India increasing and its companies developing rapidly, the Indian right-wing conservative forces have turned their spearhead toward China, believing the threat posed by Chinese capital is extremely urgent and far worse than that of the United States. They believe, unless a ban is timely put on China's investment in India, and the dumping of Chinese goods into India is immediately stopped, the local manufacturing industry in India will never see the light of recovery. They also believe that Chinese investment in India also poses a growing threat to its security. During the recent border confrontation and clashes, the Swadeshi Jagran Manch affiliated with the RSS led several nationwide anti-China protests and boycott activities against Chinese goods.

Mounting Pressure on Maintaining Domestic Stability

Professor Zheng Yongnian from the East Asia Institute of the National University of Singapore wrote in a recent article that democratic states tend to be rather weak in solving domestic problems, as it is relatively difficult for them to control their societies. As a result, democratic governments naturally want to transfer their domestic contradictions abroad, transforming them into international issues.¹ This view is also applicable to interpreting

¹ Zheng Yongnian, "Zhongmeizhizheng, wo zuidanxin zhejiانشi fasheng [I am most worried about this happening in the China-US rivalry]," accessed July 5, 2020, <https://wsdigest.com/article?artid=6995>.

the behavioral logic of the Modi administration in constantly playing up recent clashes at the Galwan Valley.

On the one hand, in order to fight against accusations from the opposition, the Modi administration has to be tough on China. Epidemic prevention and control have already become pet criticisms used by the opposition toward the Modi administration. Faced with such criticisms, Modi has few options to rely on due to the constraint of realistic conditions. It was criticized for not enforcing quarantine, while it was also criticized for enforcing quarantine. In the face of various censures from the opposition, particularly from the Indian National Congress (INC), Modi has always been in a passive position. Nonetheless, since the clashes at the Galwan Valley began, the Modi administration has always found some way to downplay public denunciation from the opposition, particularly when facing such accusations that his government is “timid” and “cowardly” toward China lodged by INC leader Rahul Gandhi. Thus, being tough toward China is the most effective way for him to respond to various criticisms from the opposition. In this regard, the Modi administration has various resources and options to employ, such as the mass mobilization of Indian troops, purchasing more advanced arms and military equipment, introducing various economic measures to decouple from China, using strong language toward China, encouraging NGOs to boycott Chinese goods, and changing tactics or tones on issues most sensitive to China, to mention just a few. Although such tactics may worsen relations with China, or even risk wounding 800 enemy troops at the cost of inflicting 1,000 injuries on its own soldiers, the consequences do not matter very much to India's leaders. Staying in power is the most important political strategy for a leader in a democracy, as it is supported by a favorable international strategic environment. In fact, since Modi became increasingly tough on China and adopted more tough measures toward it, criticisms from the opposition have obviously calmed down, while he has risen in popularity, which has further consolidated his strongman image as a security watcher.

On the other hand, in order to transfer domestic social contradictions, the Modi administration has to be aggressive toward China. Since his re-election, Modi has introduced a series of Hindu nationalist policies, such

as rebuilding the Rama Temple, introducing a unified Civil Code, and amending the Citizenship Act among others, which have intensified social, ethnic, religious and class rifts throughout India, hence giving rise to social unrest. Particularly since the Indian government adopted the controversial amendment to the Citizenship Act at the end of 2019, protests and even sometimes violence broke out nationwide and lasted for months, of which the extent, persistence and negative international impacts have rarely been seen over the past 20 years. Even during US President Trump's visit in February, the largest religious conflict since 1984 broke out in New Delhi, causing more than 40 deaths and several hundred injuries. Political damage resulting from the domestic unrest has begun to materialize. At the beginning this year, the BJP suffered a great defeat in local elections in New Delhi; nationwide the districts or local states ruled independently or jointly by the BJP have shrunk drastically from 71 percent two years ago to the present 35 percent. This series of changes have made the Modi administration's heart stop. As India's domestic politics is composed of a super diverse ecosystem, anything unexpected might happen. The 2019 national election alone can well exemplify the intensity of India's election campaigns: as many as 2,354 parties had registered to run at the central election commission, of which 450 parties nominated more than 8,000 candidates running for the 543 parliament seats. So, every vote matters. Just at the time when Modi was suffering from a lack of effective measures to deal with the domestic unrest, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic rescued him, providing him with a convenient opportunity to defuse the risk of domestic political turmoil at once by spectacularly enforcing tough quarantine measures.

Nevertheless, although civil unrest vanished instantly, epidemic prevention and control measures have immediately brought issues of livelihood to the forefront. Forced city lockdowns have caused the daily wage earners who do various odd jobs (accounting for a tenth of the population in New Delhi and Mumbai respectively) to face the dilemma of perishing from either illness or starvation. According to the BBC, at least 50 million Indians lost their jobs due to city lockdowns; while the International Labor Organization (ILO) claimed in its report that city

lockdowns have led to the loss of some 400 million jobs in the informal sector, “sinking the job losers deep in poverty.”¹ According to data from the Center for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE), India's unemployment rate soared from 8 percent in February to 27.1 percent in May, with 122 million Indians losing their jobs in April alone, which equates to a quarter of the population being out of work.² At this moment, the racial unrest raging across the United States has incited even more panic for the Modi administration.

Once again, the clashes at the Galwan Valley provided Modi with a life-saving straw to divert domestic attention. The Modi administration has chosen the lesser of the two evils by creating tension for a military confrontation with China, introducing anti-China measures, and playing up counter-China issues, under the premise of not going into war with China, which at least has temporarily pacified the domestic political opposition and calmed down the restlessness and resentment of the public, thus maintaining to the greatest extent possible political and social stability under the scourge of the epidemic. However, this will only work for a while, as the issues of livelihood will come out once again to make matters worse.

Change of Development Strategy to Overtake China

Ever since coming to office, Modi has assiduously applied and copied the Chinese model to India in the domains of economy and trade, particularly in the manufacturing industry.

Soon after his first term in office began in September 2014, Modi introduced the Made in India Initiative, vowing to grow the share of manufacturing in GDP from then 18 percent to 25 percent by 2022 (later postponed until 2025), and adopted a series of bold economic reforms and various dazzling development initiatives centering on the Made in India Initiative. However, the results have fallen far short of expectations. According to statistics from the World Bank, manufacturing in India has

¹ “About 400 Million Workers in India May Sink into Poverty: UN Report,” *Economic Times*, April 8, 2020.

² Nikhil Inamdar, “Coronavirus Lockdown: India Jobless Numbers cross 120 Million in April,” *BBC News*, May 6, 2020.

fallen every quarter, with its share in GDP hovering around 14-15 percent over the past two years, the lowest in almost 50 years.¹ China's supply-chain failure due to the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of India's manufacturing industry as it is highly dependent on China. Particularly in the four major areas that the Modi administration was bullish on, namely mobile phone, textile, electronics and auto parts, China's disrupted supply of parts has caused serious shutdowns. A UN report issued in early March said, "India is among the 15 most affected economies due to the coronavirus epidemic and slowdown in production in China."² The interruption of Chinese supplies has prompted Modi to launch a self-reliance movement, a de facto copy of the Made in India Initiative. However, his administration is clear, if riding on the development momentum of marketization and globalization, this self-reliance movement will not make any significant changes within its early and middle phases, as the Indian economy is restrained by stumbling labor, land, material and capital flows, unless, however, it is to hit on a new trail or overtake by switching lanes.

There are two options for the Modi administration to pursue. One, substitute Made in China products with ones that can already be made at home. For instance, the Indian government has planned to set higher trade barriers to or raise tariffs on some 300 non-essential low-quality products imports. These products mainly come from China, and India is already able to substitute them. For another instance, India has demanded its state-run telecoms to exclude Huawei and ZTC products when upgrading their mobile network to 4G (note, not 5G), since India already has homemade

¹ Vrishti Beniwal and Shwetha Sunil, "India Looks inward to Save Economy as Crisis Bites," *Economic Times*, June 25, 2020.

² India is highly dependent on China's industrial and supply chains. According to the latest data issued by the Confederation of Indian Industry in May 2020, localization of electronic components, medical appliances, and solar equipment elements is currently rather low; antibiotics, vitamins, auto parts and dyestuff depend heavily on import. About 14 percent of India's imports come from China, thus making China India's second largest source of imports after the Middle East. Nearly 25 percent of India's auto parts, 50 percent of its consumer durables and components, 80-85 percent of its compressors, and 95 percent of its washing machines are imported from China, see "Trade Impact of Coronavirus Epidemic for India Estimated at 348 Million Dollars: UN Report," *Economic Times*, May 5, 2020.

4G telecommunication equipment.

Relative to hardware, India is more capable of making copycat software products. Particularly in regard to popularizing mobile internet, Chinese enterprises had worked for years to assist India in promotion and training. As a result, for the first time India is standing on the doorstep of a national transition into the internet age. For instance, India's interactive video APP Mitron is highly similar to the Chinese TikTok APP in functionality and user interface. Currently, its downloads are second only to TikTok in India. The ban implemented on using Chinese mobile phone software will directly benefit copycat software in this field. In fact, a one billion-user mobile internet market is a world-class goldmine for the Modi administration, which it will not give up so easily, let alone giving it up to China with which it has a serious deficit in strategic mutual trust.

This shows that in de-sinification the Indian government is clearly selective. Currently, the Modi administration does not yet dare to fully decouple from China, not only because many Indian industries are highly dependent on its supply of spare parts and intermediate goods, but also because quite a few key industries, like common household drugs, depend on raw materials supplied from China. So, full de-sinification will only create greater economic difficulties or even social turmoil in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which, in the end, will hurt the self-reliance movement initiated by Prime Minister Modi, or even give rise to popular discontent and hatred toward him.

Second, attract the holistic transfer of industrial chains to India by taking advantage of China-US industrial decoupling, so as to realize its aspiration of becoming a manufacturing power quickly. For this purpose, last spring Prime Minister Modi demanded various Indian states to get ready to attract investments from transnational corporations leaving China, while the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) coordinated an inter-departmental committee to study and draft relevant policies for attracting foreign investment. Meanwhile, to promote the withdrawal of global industrial supply chains from China, and to establish a "network for economic prosperity composed of trusted cooperation partners," the US is also interested in promoting industrial supply chain restructuring

with India, and is encouraging American companies operating in China to transfer to India, helping India to replace “made in China” with “made in India.” The US Secretary of State Pompeo expressed at the end of April that the Trump administration was working with India to form a supply chain accessible to both the US and India, particularly in areas critical to national security.¹ When meeting with the representatives of some American corporations operating in India, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Thomas Vajda pointed out that India may become an alternative investment destination for American companies after businesses move out of China, and “both American and Indian governments will facilitate their transfer.”² Taking the recent Galwan Valley clashes as an opportunity, the Indian government took a formal stab at Chinese mobile APPs for the first time, which was also intended to clearly show its resolve to the United States.

In order to get a share in the future global industrial supply chain dominated by the US, Indian missions abroad had made intimate contacts with more than a thousand American companies, offering preferential treatment to those manufacturers intending to leave China. For this end, India has initially set aside 460,000 hectares of land specifically for hosting companies moving out of China, with a focus on such industries as electric appliance, pharmaceutical, electronic equipment, heavy machinery, solar equipment, food, chemistry and textile. In addition, India is also interested in military cooperation with the US, through which it will introduce the American military technology and national defense industry, in order to boost its national and military capacities, while simultaneously making India’s manufacturing stronger.

However, it is a big question whether India and the US are able to duplicate the China-US industrial supply chain in the end, which has to be proved by time and by the efforts of the Modi administration to make bolder reforms and adopt more courageous measures. The immediate problem is

¹ “US in Talks with India, Other ‘Friends’ to Restructure Global Supply Chains: Pompeo,” *Economic Times*, April 30, 2020.

² “Coronavirus | US State Department Supports Companies Choosing India as Alternative to China: Report,” *Money Control News*, April 29, 2020.

how to urge Indian nationals to replace the products made in China that they are accustomed to with goods produced at home, which calls for a major chance of circumstance. The patriotic and nationalistic fervor aroused by the pathos at the Galwan Valley, coupled with anti-China sentiments catalyzed by the COVID-19 epidemic, have laid the groundwork for the Indian government to enforce a ban on Chinese software and a forced substitution of Chinese goods. With the help of patriotic and nationalistic zeal, it is much easier for the Indian government to achieve mandatory substitution in a short period of time, or at least significantly advance Modi's self-reliance movement in India. However, the opportunity provided by the standoff at the Galwan Valley is limited by time. Once the tension at the valley is alleviated, the Indian government is likely to have missed this rare opportunity to overtake by switching lanes or by a lucky strike of fortune unless it timely utilizes the current patriotic and nationalistic sentiments at home.

From this, it can at least be presumed that the Modi administration's actions of constantly creating tension and openly playing up military maneuvers and buildups, which may seem to be slightly exaggerated, are obviously not intended to directly start a war with China with unanimous determination, but rather aimed at something else, namely to achieve a forced replacement of Chinese products at home, and to partially realize the transformation of Indian industry.

Contention for Regional Dominance

How two concurrently rising neighboring powers get along with each other has always been a major focus in the study of international relations. However, there have been a few successful cases since ancient times.

In the early days after establishing diplomatic ties between China and India, there was a "honeymoon period" featuring sentiments of brotherhood between the two countries, wherein they jointly proposed the five basic principles of peaceful co-existence, which is still of great guiding significance to their international relations. However, a border war inevitably broke out between the two countries. At the end of the Cold War, their relations gradually returned to normal, and they eventually came to such major

strategic consensuses such as “the two countries pose no mutual threat,” “the two countries have opportunities for each other’s development,” and “their relationship goes beyond a bilateral scope, and has strategic and global significance” by engaging in constant strategic communication and continuously expanding economic and trade cooperation. Nonetheless, the standoff between the two countries at Dong-lang in 2017 invalidated their 30 years of effort for normalization. Later on, their bilateral relations finally returned to normal again through two informal summit meetings, particularly the one held at Chennai in 2019, at which the Chinese delegation made six proposals intended “to inject endogenous impetus into the relations between the two countries.” Nevertheless, the recent clashes at the Galwan Valley as well as a series of tough measures against China adopted by the Modi administration both before and after the incident have almost nullified the efforts made by the two national leaders, as industry decoupling has removed the impetus for building a manufacturing partnership between the two countries. Further, high-intensity and large-scale military confrontations at the border have ended multiple efforts to effectively upgrade military and security exchanges and cooperation, and the ban on Chinese mobile APPs used in India has severed an important channel for enriching cultural and people-to-people exchanges. As a result, the bilateral relations between China and India have fallen to their lowest level since 1962. So to speak, their relations have never been able to escape this geopolitical game.

Because of these reasons, we must examine various factors that hinder stable co-existence between the two emerging neighbors. Many of the aforementioned factors are mostly superficial and variable, but there is an inevitable factor that has always been at play, namely the contention for regional dominance facing both states since their respective founding.

Both China and India have the necessary resources and natural endowment to become a major world power. Prior to the mid-19th century, both countries had once been major global economies as well as economic powers in their respective regions, with their combined economy accounting for about half of the world’s total. However, they lived in peace with each other due to little interaction and mutual isolation.

With the advent of the age of colonialism, India was quickly colonized by the West, while China became a semi-colonial country. While plundering the wealth of the two countries, the Western colonialists forced these two oriental economies into their colonial order built on such concepts as territorial sovereignty, nation-state and sphere of influence. In particular, the Chinese dominated oriental tributary order centering on kingship was replaced by colonial order. Under the control of the colonialists, interactions between China and India basically served as a geopolitical game among colonial powers, leaving many sequelae that would not be healed with the demise of colonialism. Instead, they were transformed into new problems for the newly founded states of modern China and India, such as border disputes, issues relating to Tibet, and trilateral relations involving China, India and their neighbors. These problems have always been affecting the development of bilateral relations between the two countries.

Originally, these problems were products of the colonial order established by the British Empire, particularly the geo-contention between the British Empire and the Russian Empire. The reason why they have been turned into new problems for modern China and India lies in their total opposite cognitive differences of their respective colonial history.

The Chinese nation feels only a deep sense of shame for its colonial history, as the colonial powers not only destroyed the Chinese dominated tributary order built on kingship in the region, but also left China with poverty and emptiness as well as a history of humiliation. As a result, new China resolutely repudiated the colonial order and cleaned house for a new beginning.

On the contrary, the Indians are full of gratitude for the British colonial rule, as it laid the base and framework for the modern national development of India, including a civilian-run military, a well-established civil service system, English spoken by the elites, judicial and financial systems based on free trade, a competitive democratic political culture, and a base for modern industrial development,¹ as well as a colonial order centering around India, which covers the entire subcontinent and northern

¹ Chen Fengjun, *Yindu shehui yu wenhua* [India's Society and Culture] (Peking University Press, 2013), 45, 46.

Indian Ocean. As a result, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first generation of leadership in India, tried to rid itself of British colonial rule on the one hand, while claiming to be the natural successor of the British Empire and implementing the inheritance procedures on the other.

As one newly-born state is a denier of the colonial order, while the other one is its successor, China and India were doomed to have a serious collision of interests or even military conflict from the very beginning of their independence and since establishing frontier and regional order. As a result, Tibet-related issues and border disputes between China and India continued to intensify until finally they went to war with one another. Even today, from time to time these two problems still threaten the stability of China-India relations. The recent conflict at the Galwan Valley is the latest example.

More complicated than issues relating to their frontier is the struggle for order in the region involving relations among China, India and their neighbors, which is mainly manifested as contention for influence and dominance. With the growth of their respective national strength, China and India, the two major regional powers, would have an increasing overlap of interests in the same area. Meanwhile, the growth of national strength has constantly enriched their respective resources and means to shape the regional order. Driven by such a strategic logic as “a strong power must start on working the neighborhood,” contention for regional dominance is unavoidable, which has become a persistent disturbance to China-India relations.

India holds, whether from historical or realistic considerations, that its geographical location in the heart of the South Asian subcontinent and the Indian Ocean makes it the natural regional leader. It goes without saying that this region is India's sphere of influence, where it has a special responsibility and obligation to maintain the regional order. Other South Asian states should not or cannot challenge India's dominance there, let alone bringing powers from outside of the region to interfere in the subcontinent. Meanwhile, any power from outside of the subcontinent should accommodate India's concerns and sensitivity on issues relating to regional order, and should actively avoid getting involved in regional affairs, instead leaving their management to India. In fact, Nehru pointed

out even before India's independence in 1947, "America had secured itself from foreign aggression under the Monroe Doctrine for almost a hundred years. It is now time to practice an Asian version of the Monroe Doctrine."¹

After independence, Nehru began to pursue "Monroeism" in South Asia, seeing South Asian affairs as its exclusive domain and trying its best to keep outside powers from becoming involved. For instance, the Nehru administration actively continued British colonial policy, not only renewing the treaties of peace and friendship with each small Himalayan country respectively, but also successively strengthening domestic and diplomatic control of Sikkim (officially annexed by India in 1975), Bhutan and Nepal. Later on, India succeeded in drawing Afghanistan and Myanmar into the South Asia Strategic Unity by signing treaties of peace and friendship with them.² Through a series of treaties, India had strategically defined the "subcontinent" as beginning from the Himalayas. As for Tibet, the Nehru administration and successive Indian governments held a grudge over China's peaceful liberation of Tibet. As early as the 1950s, particularly from 1959 to 1962, the Nehru administration risked trying to preserve and expand the colonial interests the British had seized in Tibet, repeatedly challenging China's bottom-line of safeguarding its sovereignty in Tibet and its territorial integrity. On the one hand, India continued to encroach on China's borders, constantly promoting the Forward Policy and seeking to establish the "Scientific Frontier," even going so far as to break through the border control claimed by the colonial empire in many areas. On the other hand, India sought to realize the dream that the British failed to accomplish during their colonial era, namely separating Tibet from China and making it a buffer zone between the two countries. To this end, India kept instigating the Tibetan upper class to rebel against Chinese rule and offered shelter to the Dalai Lama after the Tibetan rebellion was quelled. The tough policies pursued by the Nehru administration toward China eventually led to the outbreak of a border war between China and India.

The South Asian Monroeism initiated by Nehru became an official

¹ Tarik Jan ed., *Pakistan's Security and the Nuclear Option* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 1995), 153.

² Jaswant Singh, *Defending India* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1998), 146.

regional policy of India during the reign of his daughter Indira Gandhi. As early as 1983, she proposed a policy of “Indiraism” known as “Hinduism,” which was essentially an Indian version of Monroeism. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi openly expressed, “India does not believe in interfering in the internal affairs of any country in the region, and will not tolerate any interference by outside powers unless required; if assistance is called for in responding to internal crises, such an assistance should be sought for within the region.”¹ As the Indian elites saw it, the complexity of geopolitics and social culture in South Asia had forced India to take on the role of security manager in the region.² Influenced by such an ideology, India would consider it immoral for its South Asian neighbors to bypass it in dealing with non-South Asian countries, particularly their northern neighbor China, so it should be India’s responsibility to intervene strongly.

At the beginning of the Modi administration, New Delhi introduced the Neighborhood First policy, hence initiating the BJP’s era of Monroeism. Unfortunately, the Monroeist policy currently pursued by the BJP has collided with the advance of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. With more and more of India’s neighbors actively participating in the building of the Belt and Road, China and India have increasingly entered into an intensified contention involving regional order in South Asia and the northern Indian Ocean. India’s tendency to overreact with respect to China’s South Asian policy has become the most significant external factor that incurs domestic political unrest in India’s neighboring countries. Blocking Nepal’s border (from September 2015 to January 2016), dividing the pro-China regime in Sri Lanka (from December 2014 to January 2015), strongly curtailing the pro-China tendencies in Bhutan’s internal politics by intervening in its national elections (in 2013 and 2018), and toppling the pro-China government in Maldives (2019) were all intended to ensure

¹ R. V. R. Chandrasekhar Rao, “Regional Cooperation in South Asia,” *The Round Table*, Vol. 293, No. 1, 1985, 63; Li Zhonglin, “Yindu de menluozhuyi pingxi [An analysis on India’s Monroeism],” *Yafei zongheng* [Asia & Africa Review], No. 4 (2013), 16.

² P. Venkateshwar Rao, “Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka: India’s Role and Perception,” *Asian Survey*, No. 4, 1988, 419.

India's regional dominance would not be eroded by China's influence. The most important characteristic regarding political changes in these countries is that any political force or individual that advocates for friendship with China will be ruthlessly suppressed.

During the recent border standoff and clash, the Modi administration maintained a tough stance on China. It even went so far as to use the language of war, intending not only to press China to make concessions to the maximum extent possible, but also to deter its neighbors and knock out any of their attempts to pick a side between China and India. More importantly, the tough policy pursued by the Modi administration toward China is also aimed at pleasing the United States.

Of late, in consideration of its incapability of countering China alone, India has to cater tactically to the containment strategy of the US, adopting more active policies in line with the Indo-Pacific Strategy led by the United States. Nonetheless, many people from the American strategic community believe that what India has done is far from enough. To earn greater support from the US, India must continue to show its muscle to China. For instance, the well-known Indian-American strategist Ashley J. Tellis, who was involved in the major adjustment of America's India policy during the George W. Bush administration, openly pointed out on June 24 at a video seminar under the theme of China-India Border: Escalation and Disengagement organized by "Carnegie-India" that the US wanted India to clearly demonstrate which side it was on, China or the US, and it was up to India to decide how far their alliance would go. Further, India needed to show its own strength toward China and adopt some delicate maneuvers to indicate its strategic attitude, such as its aspiration to jointly tackle the challenges posed by China and its intentions to raise strategic interoperability among regional countries. Regarding public opinion, India needed to strengthen open contact with the other four members of the Indo-Pacific countries and make a concerted voice in the UN Security Council, as well as to take more practical actions behind the scene.

obviously, the decision made by the Modi administration to officially invite Australia to join the India-US-Japan annual Malabar military exercise in July is hard not to place into the category of showing toughness

toward China. Since the introduction of the Indo-Pacific strategy in 2017, the US had wished that India would invite the Australian military into the joint military exercise, but India had remained vague about this matter.

Advantages Offered by the International Environment

Since Prime Minister Modi came to power, India's international environment has generally improved, except its surroundings are a little disturbing. Catalyzed by the increasing demands of the US and the West to contain China, particularly in the context of intensifying China-US confrontation, India's geo-value has risen drastically, reaching its peak since independence, which has given the Modi administration more courage and confidence to be tough on China.

With China and the US entering a new phase in their comprehensive strategic game, it has become a standard bipartisan consensus in the US to draw India into its containment strategy on China. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the US has defined India successively as a "natural ally," a "net security provider" in the Indian Ocean,¹ a "cornerstone of democracy," and a strategic "offshore counterweight" of the US, not only seeing India's rise as an interest of the US, but also wishing to work with India under its Indo-Pacific strategy to realize "strategic docking" on issues relating to China, the region and the world, so as to act jointly as the "strategic stabilizer for security and prosperity." The former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson publicly claimed that the US would "never have the same relationship with China, a non-democratic society, that we can have with India as a major democracy."² This statement not only emphasized their natural ideological alliance, but also deftly suggested the common aspiration for their strategic partnership—dealing with China. It is because of these two major value orientations that the US-India relationship is continuously improving despite the distractions brought about by the America First policy pursued by the Trump administration. In late February

¹ "India as a Net Security Provider," accessed July 5, 2020, <http://www.ias4sure.com/wikiias/gs2/india-as-a-net-security-provider/>.

² Rex W. Tillerson, Remarks on "Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century," US Department of State, October 18, 2017.

of this year, President Trump, when visiting India, made a high-profile statement about the identical strategic interests shared by the two countries in regard to the Indo-Pacific and with respect to their partnership in global leadership, and officially declared the establishment of the United States-India Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership. The well-known Indian strategist C. Raja Mohan was full of praise, believing that the establishment of this partnership indicated that “India’s view of the US has taken a decisive turn, and PM Narendra Modi has broken through systematic prejudice against US engagement.”¹ As a result, India’s culture of strategic autonomy has changed. As India’s External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar explained recently, so-called “strategic autonomy” meant “multi-alignment” and “risk-taking.”²

As India has increasingly accepted US strategic courting and catered to its strategies, military and defense cooperation between them has been deepened. Since the beginning of the Trump administration, the US-India military cooperation, driven by the Indo-Pacific strategy, has gone beyond the level of just allies in certain aspects. At present, the US-India defense cooperation is moving from arms sales to the joint production of arms and synergy of combat systems; from bilateral exercises involving a single military service to joint exercises involving all services; from intelligence sharing to joint construction and operation of situational awareness systems; and from bilateral security dialogs to small-scale multilateral security cooperation and jointly building a regional military security order. During the standoff at the Galwan Valley, the US actively provided India with satellite data of the border situation, and made positive inquiries about India’s military needs, showing “concern” for the “security” of an ally. The American “warmth” has enhanced the confidence and capacity of the Modi administration to guard its security against China.

Over the course of the standoff and conflict at the border, US

¹ C. Raja Mohan, “Explained: Reading Donald Trump’s Visit to India,” *Indian Express*, February 28, 2020.

² Arun Subramaniam, “The One Speech That Explains India’s New Strategic Thinking: India’s External Affairs Minister Has Laid Out Clearly and Cogently a Set of Guiding Principles of Indian Foreign Policy,” *Diplomat*, December 5, 2019.

politicians unprecedentedly gave their high-profile support to India, among whom the US Secretary of State Pompeo was the most active. On June 15, Pompeo posted on Twitter his deepest condolences to the Indian soldiers killed in their proactive provocation of China. On June 19, he talked about the China Threat in a video speech at the 2020 Copenhagen Democracy Summit, and took the opportunity to accuse China of “escalating border tension with India.”¹ On July 8, he accused China of “taking incredibly aggressive action at the border with India.”² The intention of American politicians to draw India into its containment strategy on China is clear. Under such constant encouragement, it is difficult for the Modi administration not to feel the political impulse of being assertive with China, thus going so far as to play war brinkmanship on the border issue this time.

The deepening of the relationship between the US and India has also constantly increased the overtures of its alliance system, which is prominently displayed by the growing consolidation of small-scale multilateral security cooperation under the framework of the Indo-Pacific strategy. Over the past two years or so, consultation among the four Indo-Pacific countries (the US, Japan, Australia and India) has made headway, which already held six meetings by mid-2020, becoming more substantial each time. In September 2019, they held their first foreign ministers meeting, and more importantly, the US, Japan, Australia and India have all established a “2+2” (foreign ministers and defense ministers) consultation mechanism with each other. In addition, with India and Australia signing the Logistics Mutual Support Protocol on June 4, the logistic systems of the four countries have finally completed their networking, while their maritime situational awareness and intelligence sharing were also further networked. These developments have provided greater convenience and guarantee for the navies of these countries to conduct joint exercises and training, joint reconnaissance, and joint patrol in the future. Obviously, the four Indo-Pacific countries are working toward a coalition at the behest of the United States, hence putting

¹ “Pompeo Tears into ‘Rogue Actor’ China for ‘Escalating’ Border Tension with India,” *Hindu*, June 20, 2020.

² “Pompeo Says China Took ‘Incredibly Aggressive Action’ in Recent Clash with India,” Reuters, Washington, July 8, 2020.

India's strategic environmental favorability at an all-time high.

Although the Modi administration has yet to turn these advantages in India's geostrategic environment into a strong driving force for its national revitalization as they are still constrained by multiple institutional bottlenecks at home, regardless the favorable geostrategic environment has boosted India's major country diplomacy, thus giving rise to an increasingly tough, uncompromising and even bold mentality on the part of Modi in his policy toward China. Through its tough diplomacy, India is constantly testing China's strategic bottom line and the arbitrage space in its strategies of "stabilizing the east and looking to the west" and "drawing India into the US policy of containment." Some Indian media even claimed that under the circumstances of intensifying frictions between China and the US, the Modi administration believes that the closer India gets with the US, the more importance China will attach to India.¹ This is the geostrategic logic behind the wild fluctuations in China-India relations in recent years.

In contrast, China's external environment is full of uncertainties and dangers, insofar as India sees it. On the one hand, confrontation between China and the US is intensifying in a comprehensive way, as the US is waging a full-government, all-dimensional, and all-hour crackdown on China, and even has gone so far as to speed up the construction of an anti-China coalition. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the restructuring of global industrial, supply and value chains, thus putting the Chinese economy at risk of facing a severe shock from the anti-globalization process.

Indeed, the current situation for China-India relations is somewhat similar to that during the period from 1959 to 1962. At that time, the over confidence of the Nehru administration to feverishly promote the Forward Policy at India's borders with China was derived from New Delhi's belief that it enjoyed concurrent blessing from the two world superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, while at the same time China was

¹ "Sino-India Relations Defined More by Rivalry than Partnership," *Hindustan Times*, July 26, 2016.

suffering from the great famine internally and initial rifts in its relations with the Soviet Union externally, as well as the economic and military blockade of the West led by the US. The reason why China could reverse the situation through a war of self-defense at the border was mainly due to the ability of the Chinese leadership to timely seize the strategic opportunity brought about by the Cuban Missile Crisis between the US and the Soviet Union, which both occurred at almost a complete overlap of time.

On the whole, the sharp contrast between the external strategic environment facing China and India is at least an important cause for India to steadily increase its toughness toward China. It shows to some extent that the current tension in China-India relations brought about by the clashes at the Galwan Valley is, as a matter of fact, also a strong refraction of a geopolitical game between major regional powers.

Conclusion

In a comprehensive view, the China-India relationship is highly probable to enter a long period of fluctuation. Faced with this new normal, it is obvious that such a relationship needs to be reconstructed.

The future of India-China relations is likely to see two prospects of contest. On the one hand, India and China will continue to fight over the border, particularly at the western section. The contest over the border is highly likely to move from the level of “reconciliation through dialogs” to a new stage featuring “contention for control with real power.” This type of border contest for control will inevitably give rise to border standoffs and clashes, as the conflict at the Galwan Valley is anything but the end of history. Given the fact that the Indian government has fully authorized its border troops to freely dispose of incidents occurring at the border, the probability of escalation from cold weapons to firearms in the conflict is likely to increase in the future. Despite all this, so long as a hot war is avoided, this stabilized standoff and confrontation at the border is objectively conducive for the two sides to figure out each other’s bottom line of tolerance. Over time, the bottom line of tolerance will become a red line lying between the border troops of both countries that cannot be

overstepped, which will eventually become the real line of control between the two countries. Once such a red line is in place, the border regions between the two countries can basically maintain peace and tranquility, even though they may not reach consensus on a mutually-accepted “international boundary” in the legal sense. Nonetheless, before this is made into a reality, crisis control will be the primary task of the border authorities of both countries. How to ensure normal cooperation in other areas, particularly in maintaining and expanding development cooperation conducive to each other's rising in the context of border standoffs and clashes becoming the new normal constitutes a great test to the wisdom and capacity of both governments in running their respective countries. On the other hand, the building of the Belt and Road, particularly the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century, will give rise to a long-term geopolitical game with the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy unfolding in the South Asian subcontinent and northern part of the Indian Ocean. The Belt and Road Initiative is the development strategy for China's rise, while the US takes the Indo-Pacific strategy as a counter approach to contain China's rise. Meanwhile, India is caught in between, seeing the Indo-Pacific strategy as an important approach to its rise as a major power. As a result, the most intense collision of these two grand strategic systems will be seen in the land and sea regions between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, with the South Asian subcontinent and northern part of the Indian Ocean being the most important theater of contest. It is imaginable that the geopolitical game between China and India will become more intensified unless they restructure their relationship.

The key to defusing the crisis in this major power game lies in the mentality that sees the rise of a major power as a driver and opportunity for its own rise, which are mutually-reinforcing. It is impossible for two giant neighboring countries to move away from each other, instead they will only have increasingly overlapping and intertwining interests in their common neighborhood. Only by rejecting the old notions of absolute and exclusive sovereignty, and by embracing the mentality of win-win cooperation, can they escape the current zero-sum dilemma embedded in the geo-security of this major power game.

As both India and China have already had a strong late-comer advantage, complementary advantage, and first-mover advantage, the geographical advantage of adjacency should have delivered unprecedentedly great development prospects for these three advantages. Even if India believes that the benefits attained from cooperating with the US can offset the cost of being tough on China, it is only a temporary phenomenon when one considers the development issue, as India and China have shared interests and face common difficulties in this regard, which will more easily bring them together than with other developed economies. In addition, the threats facing India and China as well as their shared interests are not only highly identical, but are also unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, which should serve as the bedrock for their enduring cooperation. The common threat and shared interests involve how to resolve the principal contradiction facing the governments of both countries, namely the contradiction between the aspirations and demands of the two peoples for a better life and the unequal, unbalanced and inadequate socio-economic development of the two countries. If all the mouths of the peoples of China and India are put together, there would be a bottomless pit the size of 140 to 150 square kilometers. The huge challenge pressuring the governments of both countries is how to ensure filling this pit with enough good-quality food at least twice a day. Therefore, the trinity of threat, challenge and interest has offered the best reason in the world for India and China to cooperate and co-exist in peace.

India and China are also facing a more pressing challenge. As the world is undergoing some of the most drastic changes unseen in a century, both sides need to plan and act deliberately before these changes can be made to evolve in favor of their rising. India and China are major countries with a long history that are absolutely unwilling to become vassals of other great powers. If they are absent in the forthcoming changes due to the endless wrangles and frictions between them, it will put an end to the period of strategic opportunity for them to re-create historical glories.

If we must design a stable and far-reaching path for the future development of China-India relations, both countries have to build a relationship resembling two cars driving in parallel lanes, each sticking to

their own respective lanes, while never forcing other cars to follow, nor changing lanes or overtaking suddenly to cause accidents. Or better yet, they stop and interact with each other every now and then, and assist each other in addressing their respective problems or emergencies involving other countries before reaching their respective destinations safe and sound.

If all this comes to pass, the China-India relationship will surely enjoy a smoother ride over the next 70 years.

(edited by Zhao Jinfu)