Is India Losing?: A Conversation with Ashley Tellis

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Arzan: Let's begin because it is 2020 with the LAC crisis as a potentially pivotal episode in the India-China strategic competition. Let me ask you: if you were an analyst or a historian 20 years from now or 50 years from now looking back on 2020 how would you look back on this crisis?

Ashley: I think it would be potentially a turning point in the way India sees its relations with China and possibly the way India thinks of itself in the wide Indo-Pacific now. Much will depend on how this crisis turns out. If India is successful in getting the Chinese to go back to the status quo ante**,** then it will be a major boost to India's fortunes and I suspect that's really what the government of India would like to see at the end of this process, but it is still too early to tell so we have to keep final judgments in advance.

Arzan: That's a bit more of a hopeful answer than I think a lot of analysts would have given**.** Let me ask you directly and hopefully this won't end the webinar in the next three minutes. Is India losing the broader strategic competition or do you think it's not?

Ashley: I think it risks losing the broader strategic competition, but the fat lady hasn't sung yet. India can still retrieve its position, but it would require some very hard decisions to be taken in New Delhi and I think the current government is struggling with those decisions. They are groping towards them in in bits and pieces, but I don't see as yet a coherent strategy to get India out of the rut that it finds itself in. As far as the economy is concerned—because that makes such a difference to India's political fortunes—I see the government struggling, and in some dimensions even going backwards, so we will have to wait and see whether India can deliver on the promise.

Arzan: Let's get into the theoretically informed rigorous analysis and let's talk about how we've gotten to where we are now. As we've said here in the South Asia initiative, there has been a many months-long crisis where the PLA is encamped on Indian territory with no imminent prospect of a return to the status quo ante and it does seem to have been a bigger than usual, certainly a more consequential than usual, failure of Indian deterrence. Would you agree with that and if so, how do you account for that?

Ashley: I think it's more than just a failure of deterrence. There's certainly a failure of a deterrence element to it. I think it's a bigger failure in terms of Indian strategy towards China itself because Indian strategy assumed that as long as India kept lines of communication open to China, as long as India deepened its economic interdependence with China, there would be enough freedom for both sides to manage their differences. What this crisis showed was that this strategy was not sufficient to the task, that despite growing interdependence, despite the big investments that Prime Minister Modi made in building a personal relationship with Xi Jinping and directing Indian diplomacy from the very top as it were, when push came to shove the Chinese were brutal in terms of defending their interests and they

did so without regard to India's equities, even without regard to the loss of life that they inflicted on India.

I think it's a much bigger challenge than just a deterrence figure. I'm happy to talk about the deterrence dimension more specifically in any case, but I think we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that this goes beyond deterrence, it goes beyond limitations of intelligence, or the processing of intelligence—it really goes to the heart of Indian strategy vis-a-vis China and that is really the most disconcerting dimension of this whole affair.

Arzan: Let me pursue this tangent before we return to deterrence. We've heard quite a few analysts reference this idea that India's source of leverage in this crisis is the broader relationship with China and the threat that it dangles of a closer relationship with the United States. Are you suggesting that this is not a winning strategy? That this idea that India can threaten China with a rupture in the broader India-China relationship and that it can threaten China with a closer India-U.S. relationship- are you suggesting that that's a losing proposition?

Ashley: No, far from it. The danger is not that the strategy is inherently contradictory or inherently implausible. The danger is that the Chinese have concluded that no matter how stressful India's environment is, it will not make that bridge towards a new relationship with the United States. In that sense, they have read India in a particular way. They have put more weight on India's strategic autonomy than India might put on its own conception of strategic autonomy because they've convinced themselves that under no plausible scenario would India behave differently compared to how it has behaved in the last several decades, which is it will engage in a dalliance with the United States and with other Indo-Pacific partners, but it will never cut loose from its deep-seated moorings for independence. From a Chinese point of view, the Indian threat at the end of the day is an empty threat. Unless India is willing to make good on that threat, the deterrence benefits that come from that strategy will simply not be realized.

Arzan: Let me focus on now bringing that response together with the deterrence issue. Let’s focus in on the deterrence equation on the LAC. Are you suggesting then that essentially the thing that allowed the Chinese to launch this incursion and maintain this incursion has ultimately little to do with the military balance on the border, or to put it in other words, was there anything that India could have done militarily to deter this incursion in 2020?

Ashley: Let's sort of try and answer it from first principles. I think the Chinese gambled on the fact that they will be that they would be able to achieve their tactical objectives while still preserving surprise and that gamble proved to be true. India realized what the Chinese were up to only after the Chinese were successful tactically in terms of occupying territory. The Chinese also gambled on the fact that India was not ready to engage in a major military operation to eject China from its newfound gains and thus far that position has also proven to be true. For very good reasons, India has sought to deal with the problem through means other than a straightforward military operation to eject the invaders. At least on these two counts the Chinese had a realistic assessment of the facts on the ground as it were, and they acted in accordance with those facts precisely because they had these assumptions.

I think they were successful because people don't realize, but India actually has significant military advantages in terms of the balance vis-à-vis China, but those advantages cannot be realized until you can actually bring troops to the point of contact. Because India was slow in bringing those troops to the point of contact, the Chinese were able to sort of do what they did and get away with it. In effect, now what they've done is they've confronted India with a fait accomplit and they have put the onus of escalation on India. India has responded rather artfully in late August by doing what I had suggested in early May, that should consider a tit-for-tat operation where you at least sort of recover some bargaining leverage.

The Indians have certainly done that, but in effect what this now means is that we are locked into the prospects of a very long standoff because both sides now control territory that the other claims. Both sides don't feel compelled to walk away from those territorial gains in the short term anyway and I think the winter will determine what the relative costs to both sides are for maintaining their current positions. Now this is where India has advantages because India has operated at high altitudes in extremely adverse environmental conditions for decades. Look at the Indian defense at Siachen. China has never operated in a comparable environment, so who cries uncle first is really going to depend on how they come out at the end of this winter.

Arzan: You've touched on a lot of themes that I want to pursue today—everything from the relative costs that each site is pursuing to how this winds up—but let me go through it systematically and let's take a step back. One of the things you touched upon is this idea of what were India's viable options? You mentioned the tit-for-tat option, but let's take a step back and again talking about deterrence. I promised that this would be theoretically informed. Now in the United States, for example, there is a debate about different schools of deterrence—what works better and under what conditions—there are people who suggest that that the United States should pursue a denial strategy in Asia. Mike Gallagher has written about that, there are others like Aaron Friedberg who suggests that, no, there is no substitute for a punishment strategy. If we're talking about deterrence in these sorts of broad terms of denial and punishment, in your view, what works? Especially under the conditions that India faces, it sounds like from what you've said that India had no option but to pursue a punishment strategy. Is that what you're saying?

Ashley: No, I think the ideal strategy— they were forced to pursue a punishment strategy because the initial response was non-strategic. They sort of ceded ground before they could even compel the Chinese to revisit their calculus. Let's go back to the issue that you raised about what were India's choices in terms of deterrence theory. In conventional warfare, there is really no alternative to deterrence by denial because conventional instruments simply cannot levy the kinds of punishment that deter adversaries from taking aggressive actions. In that sense, nuclear weapons are superb as instruments of punishment because you don't need many of them—a few of them do such devastating damage that strategies of punishment are very effective, which is why even the United States, a great power with both conventional and nuclear capabilities always hesitates when it has to go to war against adversaries that have nuclear weapons. That's how countries like North Korea can effectively deter the United States.

The punishment capabilities inherited nuclear weapons are so absolute in the realm of conventional warfare that denial is all you have. You have to use your forces in a way to prevent the other side from reaching its objectives. This is where you run into the first gamut of problems where India is concerned because India has spent the last 70 years of its independent life focusing on deterring major conventional attacks on India. The entire Indian military is designed to deter major conventional attacks. In recent years they've been forced to face up to the threat of terrorism, but they still don't have good answers as far as deterrence theory is concerned about how you deter low-intensity attacks that appear in the form of terrorism. You can try punishment and on occasion India tried, for example, in Balakot, to punish the Pakistanis for terrorism, but because conventional punishment is never relentless enough and never punitive enough you then end up having to do what the Israelis do, which is go in over and over and over again without any assurance that you've actually changed the calculus.

Now India has come to grips with a reality that they've never had to face before, which is salami slicing by a superior military power, at least in nominal terms. If the Pakistanis were to try salami slicing it would be easy to deal with it because India's conventional advantages allow for effective strategies of punishment. When you are dealing with salami slicing by a nominally superior conventional power like China, punishment takes on a very different character and it is not surprising that the Indian government has actually been skittish about thinking of punishment strategies. What they've done is the little that

they could do to level the playing field in terms of bargaining, but they have done nothing that actually inflicts punishment in any meaningful way for what the Chinese have done.

If one were to go back and replay this movie all over again and ask what India should have been doing, ideally what India should have been doing was receiving strategic warning that something was afoot in terms of Chinese calculation, particularly since the end of the last year, and India should have followed that strategic warning by seeking tactical warning for when the Chinese diversions from their military exercises were taking place. In an ideal world the, Indian military would have been responsible enough that it would have been able to deploy very quickly to the contested zones and essentially checkmate the Chinese from making good on their tactical objectives. That denial failed for reasons of both strategic and tactical intelligence failures. India was left with no other choice but to try and level the playing ground through trying tit-for-tat strategies.

We are now going to be in an open-ended phase of strategic bargaining and that strategic bargaining will take the form partly of punishment. India is trying to levy economic punishments—whether it will actually focus the Chinese mind, I'm doubtful, because India does not have that kind of leverage vis-à-vis China in the economic realm. India has given up on the thought of conventional military punishment, so that leverage has disappeared and the only threat that it has is really the threat of a fundamental change in the relationship with China**.** If what I said before turns out to be true**,** then the Chinese have reason to discount that threat because they have much greater faith in India's independence and therefore will proceed to act on that assumption.

Arzan: Excellent, there's a lot in that that I want to unpack but let me actually take a couple of those tangents one by one. First, you suggested that the reason that India could not or did not effectively execute a denial campaign to prevent the incursions came down to a paucity of both strategic and tactical intelligence. I've written a piece that suggested that even with that intelligence warning, Indian doctrine would not have allowed it to respond with alacrity and nimbleness. Is the implication of what you're suggesting that an India better equipped with strategic and tactical intelligence—and perhaps this is a role that the United States can play—would in the future be better postured to deny incursions or attempts like this?

Ashley: There is no alternative. There is no alternative to being able to checkmate this before the adversary can make those tactical gains because the alternatives, which involve ejection operations, are much costlier and they have escalatory risks that cause the defender to recoil in the face of having to pay those costs. The only way to defeat the strategy is essentially to make certain that the assailant can never carry out the salami slicing successfully to begin with.

There's a whole academic literature that shows that if successful salami slicing occurs, it's usually very hard to get the assailant to pull back. The logic of that is actually quite compelling because after all it is only a salami slice right, they have not gone after the whole enchilada as it were, so there are issues of proportionality that immediately come to the fore. How much violence are you prepared to utilize to punish the adversary for simply taking a tiny slice? He's not taking over the capital, he's not taken over your major cities, he's taken over some marginal piece of territory. Are you willing to go to war over that?

If you want to avoid being put in a position where these kinds of choices paralyze your decision-making, the only way to do that is to beat him to the punch. When you see that there is incipient salami slicing underway, you move with great alacrity, deploy your forces, and then leave the onus of escalation on him rather than having to exercise the options of escalation, which for India become more difficult because it is the weaker power.

The point that you make in the Carnegie paper is absolutely sensible because if you have huge military forces that are preparing for the decisive battle that never comes and in the meantime are incapable of

arresting a resolute foe from nibbling your territory, then I think there will come a point when the Indian people will ask themselves what's the point of maintaining such a huge military establishment with all the attendant costs? I think that debate cannot begin right now because the crisis is still ongoing but when this is solved, however it's solved, there will be a moment of reckoning where people will have to ask hard questions about what kind of military they want and how they hope to utilize it.

Arzan: I don't disagree with what you said but there is one counterargument, which I'd like you to address. When you said that there is no alternative to denial, I completely agree with you but given the situation has unfolded as it has unfolded, we are where we are, and we can't turn back the clock. Some analysts are suggesting that India has the option of horizontal escalation. A lot of people are saying that India should take the fight to the Indian Ocean Region. I think part of the problem with that idea is that people don't then specify what that actually means. Could you address this idea of horizontal escalation to the Indian Ocean? Is it viable? Is it realistic? Would it serve India's purposes?

Ashley: The only horizontal escalation that is sensible in this context is horizontal escalation within a single operational theater. That is in effect what India has done in Ladakh. When it was losing territory in the Pangong Tso area in Galwan, it responded by escalating horizontally, beating the Chinese to the punch on the south bank of the Pangong Tso because those are chips that can be traded. If you think of changing the instrumentalities of war—dealing with a land crisis by using naval instruments—it's not irrational conceptually, but it opens the door to a much bigger and wider war than I think India seeks relative to the aims that it pursues.

There has to be a correlation between the means and the ends. What are the ends here? All the ends, as best I can tell, consist of India trying to get the Chinese to go back to the status quo ante in what are explicitly disputed areas where both sides agree there are claims and counter claims that each side has. If India decides to engage in horizontal escalation beyond the theater and go to the Indian Ocean—and, again, I want to know what that means; is India talking of sinking Chinese ships or holding at risk Chinese commerce? These will be seen as open acts of war—then we've gone way beyond salami slicing.

If India wants to think about punishment, I think it's better to think about punishment in smaller doses than to think of punishment in this form. One, it does not achieve your tactical aims of getting them to go back to where they came from and two, you only open up more fronts. Then there are costs, which have to be factored in through a larger expansion of the conflict, and I think although there are voices, I think the government of India has responded with what I think of as quiet resolution. They have made the decision not to accept the Chinese aggression and I would not underestimate the importance of this. That is unlike many Southeast Asian states that sort of folded because they felt simply incapable of facing up to China. Even though India has suffered a reverse, it has not folded, it is holding the line, and it is engaged in a long and lengthy conversation that may ultimately fail. We don't know, but the point that they are not giving in I think is really something that India should be applauded for and to my mind it carries the seeds of hope that the Chinese will finally see sense and then decide to go back to the status quo ante for a variety of reasons, not just simply their calculations vis-a-vis India.

Arzan: That's a really good and rare and important bit of perspective that in fact there has not yet been a capitulation. I have focused on the problem that there is no clear, at least in my mind, path or theory of victory for how India can reverse the incursions and return to the status quo ante, but the fact that there has not yet been a capitulation is not an insignificant point which is a point well taken and that is that…

Ashley: If I may just add one more thought to that, there is also the threat of graduated escalation. It's not graduated escalation in a military sense, but it's certainly graduated escalation using other levers of national power. I said I was skeptical that that would be effective, but as the Marxists used to say, at some point there is a law of sudden leap. You can do things and dribbles and dribbles and dribbles, but those dribbles reach a cumulative point where it suddenly changes the situation entirely. For India to try

that is not irrational because even as India wants to regain the territories that it has lost, it also wants to do this without sacrificing other competing objectives which are equally important, which is avoiding major war, not losing its freedom of its strategic autonomy vis-à-vis the rest of the world, and so on and so forth. Indian policy makers are not dealing with this as simply a linear problem, they're dealing with this rather as a discrete problem that has many other entanglements and they're trying to maximize their gains across multiple interests. That's why it becomes more complicated, but it's not necessarily futile given the multiplicity of objectives that they're trying to achieve.

Arzan: That again is a really interesting point because a lot of people—and we've had a question about other punitive measures that New Delhi has taken, like the app ban, trade protectionist measures, or investment protection measures—have decried those steps as being ineffective, but the point you're making is that we need to zoom out and look at the whole picture. When you take into account the balance of all these different factors then it'll reach a tipping point at some stage.

Ashley: Absolutely, and it will ultimately hinge on the costs that India is willing to pay as well. Banning the apps to my mind is symbolic**.** It denies the Chinese notional Indian data which would come once these apps actually develop ecosystems and data is available. Stuff like that I think the Chinese can sacrifice in the near term without too many afterthoughts, but the Indian efforts to cut China out from government procurement is much more serious because it goes to the heart of China's diversification strategies with respect to the famous going out approach that the Chinese policymakers have been sort of pursuing the last many years. If India were to take even bolder steps like, for example, demand that Indian companies not use Chinese cloud services, that would be a phenomenal penalty on China because China benefits and profits greatly from the cloud services that Indian manufacturers and service providers use.

If one is thinking strategically about this, I could create a Herman Kahn-like ladder of things that China could do, that India could do purely in the economic realm that would bring the cost to the point where they become increasingly prohibitive. In all bargaining you have to be prepared to pay a cost as well. Ultimately bargaining games are who has greater leverage and who is willing to bear greater costs than the adversary in getting those objectives. If India is willing to put some meaningful things on the table as things that it's willing to risk, it could still pull these chestnuts out of the fire.

Arzan: You've mentioned a few times this idea of costs—both costs in terms of allowing the confrontation to go on and allowing the Chinese to remain on Indian territory—but let me ask you more specifically to weigh for Indian decision makers, if you were sitting in Delhi, the relative cost of allowing this crisis to continue, let's say virtually indefinitely (months or longer) and implicit in that is the cost of living with, if not capitulating to China, at least living with the reality the de facto reality that the fait accompli has happened and that Chinese troops are for all intents and purposes permanently on Indian soil versus the cost required to eject them either militarily or, as you said, through a wider range of national instruments of power. Which cost is more or less bearable than the other? What is really the cost of living with this fait acomplit? And what costs is India willing to bear to eject China?

Ashley: India is not willing to bear the costs of going to war and that is for completely understandable reasons. India would much prefer a long and drawn-out standoff to a quick resolution through conflict because a quick resolution through conflict has unpredictable endings and it would change the character of both India's development trajectory and India's geopolitical trajectory. If you ended up in a major war with China, which is essentially an unrestrained war, I think the Indian effort to remain strategically autonomous would become simply untenable and India would have to commit far greater resources to an open-ended war with China that could severely derail its development plans. This is something that Prime Minister Modi has no interest in doing, so he's prepared to bear the costs of a long standoff because it still falls under the threshold of manageability.

Remember, the amazing thing about Modi has been that even though he suffered a reverse, that reverse on the front has not translated into any political reverses for him domestically. We used to talk of we used to talk of Ronald Reagan as being the Teflon president; Narendra Modi has turned out to be the genuine article. Despite the reverses it has had no impact on his political standing. As long as there are no direct political costs that he has to bear in the context of national politics, the costs of a simple long drawn standoff are essentially lesser, including the costs that will be born. The Indian defense budget will have to adjust its operations accounts to make this happen but remember in the scheme of things it's still modest because we are talking of a relatively small sector compared to the entirety of the Sino-Indian boundary and the entirety of the India-Pakistan boundary.

Indian troops have planned for these operations. They are working on relatively durable supply lines. They can sustain those troops through the winter if required. They know how to do this after sea action and so, although one might turn down and say in some sense this would be needless if you could only get the Chinese to walk away and India would save so much, all of which is true, if the alternative is that India continues to resist and stay right there, I think an Indian government would calculate that that is still a lesser cost to pay compared to the alternatives of major war with China, which require huge sacrifices on the development agenda and then a really potentially conclusive loss of strategic economy.

If India gets into a major China war, it's going to need friends. Already this crisis has shown how dependent India is on the United States for intelligence, for even for equipment, and if you are talking of a high-intensity board where the wastage is acute, where you run out of munitions quickly, and so on and so forth, then the meaning of strategic autonomy will undergo a radical revision of the kind that I don't think the present Indian government is prepared for.

Arzan: It would be quite Orwellian to persist with that fiction. We've already strayed into the territory of balancing internal balancing, which was the next section that I wanted to bring up. Here you have written extensively about the importance of India to build its comprehensive national power underpinned by a strong economy—there is no substitute for economic growth and military modernization—but let's now address this issue of India's wherewithal to do this internal balancing.

The first question on this topic I want to tie to what we were talking about just now, about costs with this idea of internal balancing. We've heard people, and you alluded to this as well, talk about the LOC-ization of the LAC—of a larger garrison deployed forward—you mentioned just now that it would only be in one sector of the LAC, but we've heard people talk about it being all along the LAC. I suppose the counterpoint or the alternative to that as you alluded to before is to have a robust intelligence picture of what red force is doing so that you can in a timely manner execute a denial campaign and not have to perpetually deploy forward. The question is, and we'll broaden out subsequently, but first just on this issue of defending the LAC—you suggested that the cost of a LOC-ization of it would be bearable, would not be that significant…

Ashley: Would be bearable compared to the alternatives, yes. There is a very practical reason for that as well because of the terrain. It is so even if India had perfect intelligence and it knew that the Chinese were coming. Because of the altitude differences, where Indian reserves are maintained vis-a-vis the altitudes, where these have to be deployed, you cannot have instantaneous deployment because there has to be a period of acclimatization, there has to be a period of adjustment to simply the environment in which you're going to operate. Unless you are confident that there's going to be no intrusion and all you want is essentially a monitoring mechanism to ensure that, you cannot really have strategic reserves at great depth and simply expect to deploy with alacrity at the slightest intelligence warning.

In practice what you do is you maintain troops, if not at the immediate front, at least in intermediate locations where the acclimatization problems are behind you and then you move from those intermediate locations to the actual line of contact in relatively short order, but in practical terms there is

no alternative for India but to maintain some kind of garrison forces as close to the lines of contact as possible. Of course, the better way to do this is to go back to negotiations and see if you can talk the Chinese into making good on all their commitments under the various agreements, which is that you don't maintain positions and strength in contested areas, you don't build infrastructure in contested areas, you allow patrols to move across disputed territories without inhibition and without being apprehended. If China is willing to go back to those understandings, which were negotiated since the 90s, then you could imagine an alternative defense posture that India could have which resembles something like its traditional posture, but if those agreements are now finally out of the window, then I don't see any alternative. India will have to garrison forces and India will certainly have to improve its tactical ISR with capabilities that it currently does not have.

Arzan: Does this impose on India an opportunity cost? Let's say this is the least bad of bad options for India. Where, then, do these resources come from? Do they come from elsewhere in the army, meaning the LoC itself, or do we see yet another reason for India to cap the recapitalization of the air force, to retire to modernization of the navy? Is this the opportunity cost of this India's regional posture?

Ashley: That is my real fear. I think the tactical opportunity cost, or the sort of immediate opportunity costs, are completely bearable. India has allocated formations for operations on the China front. There are mountain infantry divisions and dual task formations -- all of this is in Indian planning. They've done the math. That's not, to me, the problem. The problem is that this ends up reinforcing India's continental mindset. That is the strategic penalty that has real long- range consequences, because India loses on both counts. I don't know if you remember a piece Evan Montgomery wrote many years ago that was wonderfully provocative. He said that the US, instead of getting India to work on the navy on maritime issues, should focus on getting India to bolster its conventional capabilities vis-à-vis China so that it could actually divert Chinese resources from its eastern seaboard to dealing with its southwestern frontiers. It's a great idea, except that it's so impractical, for reasons of both geography and cost. For India to be able to compel China to divert attention from the eastern seaboard to the southwest frontier would require an enormously larger Indian military of a very different kind. I mean it wouldn't just bust the military budget it would bankrupt it.

Now, my fear is that India will attempt to do some version of the Montgomery strategy lite – it will bolster conventional defenses in the north even as it maintains big formations in the west. The net result will be an Indian army that already swallows 60-65% of the Indian defense budget potentially ending up swallowing more. The grand Indian dream of being able to break out of the subcontinent and play a role on a wider Asian stage is in jeopardy. You see this now with respect to debates about the Indian aircraft carrier. The Indian navy a few years ago made the case for a large deck carrier, and their argument was is that if you believe Modi's vision of a blue economy and new national security strategy that takes India's role as a security provider seriously, then India does need projectable power, for which you need aircraft carriers. What has happened now is that the aircraft carriers became a simple hostage to the constraints of India's military budget. Now, there are increasing demands by the land forces for more resources in the face of a resolute adversary. You end up losing in both ways, in the sense that India will put more money into continental defense but will not be able to fundamentally transform its strategic problem, even as it loses the capacities to then shape the maritime space -- which is where the Chinese are going to be present in more dramatic ways in the future. To my mind, that is really the disconcerting consequence of this entire fiasco in eastern Ladakh.

Arzan: I couldn't agree more. Before we get to the bigger questions of internal balancing, let me pursue a smaller question amount the domain which we haven't spoken much about—air. You recently said that the Indian Air Force is in a relatively good position relative to both Pakistan and China. But you've also written about the problems and dangers facing the IAF as it pursues its long overdue recapitalization. Can you explain why you have confidence in the IAF's capability compared to China?

Ashley: Ok, that hinges very much on the balance of infrastructure, and that's something people don't look at. They look at the PLAF and the numbers, and they match that against Indian numbers. Of course, that balance is conspicuous for its asymmetry. There is the PLAF which has 2000 odd planes, and the IAF has about 650/700. But the real question is how many of those planes that exist in the Chinese infantry can actually be brought to bear against India? That takes you to looking at the infrastructure in the Tibetan plateau that can sustain Chinese air operations. When you look closely at that infrastructure, at least at the moment, India has terrific advantages because it has many more air bases in proximity to the front than China, they are all mutually supporting (which Chinas are not), and it has a much larger fraction of advanced combat aircraft which it can deploy very close to the Sino- Indian border (which China has not done so far). When you look at pilot quality, the best IAF sQuadrons and pilots are better than their Chinese counterparts, and India has got some advantages in electronic warfare with respect to its integrated air defense system which is undergoing modernization, and so on.

But it's an air force with big liabilities as well. The biggest liability to my mind is not just numbers but the fact that the IAF is too platform centric. It's not focused as much on effects as it is on the platform. So it's put an enormous amount of capital into buying expensive planes, which are phenomenal aircraft one-on-one, but air warfare is not about one-on-one encounters. The moment you go into multiple aircraft encounters, the marginal differences in aircraft quality disappear in a heartbeat. So, India needs to ask itself, what is the value of putting in enormous resources and buying high end fighter aircraft, which when deployed en masse do not give you the types of payoffs that cheaper systems would deliver? India needs to rethink its air power model more than anything else. For the moment, the point I was trying to make is that the IAF has terrific air power advantages, as it does naval advantages, but these air power advantages could potentially waste assets because if India does not think beyond the next aircraft purchase to bigger questions about the kind of air power force that it wants to have, and this involves thinking about complementary capabilities, including unmanned platforms, greater investment in network centricity, etc., you could end up with an air force made up of the best planes on the planet, but end up being extremely expensive and not delivering the combat outputs that an alternative force architecture might be able to deliver at a cheaper cost.

Arzan: Absolutely, I really appreciate you taking the perspective of doing more than just airframe counting because of course military capabilities is much more than a quantitative comparison so that's a very important perspective**.** On that point, let's go even at a level of abstraction higher**—**we look at the Indian military as a whole**,** we are now at the end of 2020 nearing the one-year anniversary of India having a CDS, which was of course the sort of totemic milestone for jointness**,** but can I ask you, of course**,** it hasn't fixed the issue of jointness**,** but how far has it come? How far has jointness come in the Indian military? Has it rectified or served to mitigate what Anit Mukherjee calls the "absent dialogue" and how much more work is there left to be done and how realistic is it that India will do that?

Ashley: First, the decision to appoint to CDS was a huge step forward but remember this is another story about India. We have been discussing the issues about the CDS since the 1980s, if not earlier. It has taken India 30 years to make this decision and the decision is still very preliminary. These are still baby steps to my mind. If India is to regain the benefits of jointness we have to ask ourselves three questions: first, does the CDS today enable genuinely joint military planning? The answer is no; second, does the CDS today enable genuinely joint military acquisitions? The answer is no; third, does the CDS today genuinely enable the creation of joint warfighting organizations? The answer is no.

If one is a cynic, one could dismiss this as an entirely cosmetic exercise. I don't want to do that because I think India is struggling, we're trying to create a joint system, but I don't think it has civilian decision makers who adequately appreciate the benefits of jointness. I've had the privilege of talking to Indian politicians now for close to 30 years and they have only hazy notions of what jointness is and the one thing we learned in the United States was that jointness is not going to come from below, it's not going to come because the services demand to be joined—if anything the services are going to demand to be

separate—so jointness comes because it's imposed upon military organizations by very perspicacious civilian leaders.

For all of the Indian military's weaknesses, the real deficits are on the civilian side, where you have civilian politicians and bureaucrats with enormous power, but not the competence to deal with military issues. So, part of the reason for the hesitation is simply because they are being compelled to make decisions on subjects that they don't feel comfortable about and because the way the Indian system is structured, it is odd that you will find a Jaswant Singh or an Arun Singh who sort of makes it his vocation to go out and study military issues. For most Indian politicians, there is a basic contentment that India is secured. The first and most important objective is to coup-proof the state, the biggest objective is not to have a highly efficient military that goes out and sort of conquers the world for you. As long as you don't have that attitude where you see internal issues as being paramount, we'll never get to the kind of jointness that I believe India actually needs. So far Anit has done a great job in identifying the problem and identifying its multiple dimensions, but I would say despite the appointment of the first CDS we still have a very, very, very long way to go.

Arzan: Absolutely. Let me wrap up the internal balancing section with one overarching question. Internal balancing is difficult—obviously it takes a lot of economic resources and you've already mentioned that India has a struggling economy, and it has many obstacles in terms of military modernization. Given the constraints that face New Delhi now, the material constraints that it has and the organizational constraints**,** how should India prioritize long-term levels of power? What long-term either military acquisitions or other forms of accruing power which are relatively affordable because of the economic situation would give India the most bang for its buck vis-à-vis China?

Ashley: There are no easy answers here at all and when one thinks about the challenges, the challenges are so enormous that they almost drive you to despair because there are no easy solutions for India. People every now and then say that India should sort of economize on its manpower, India should start thinking about more capital-intensive solutions and that's the way to sort of deal with the defense crunch. Those are attractive propositions in principle**,** but in practice they are extremely hard to do because when you, say, take a simple example substituting machines for men**,** if you were to really do that seriously, you'd need a very different kind of Indian army**,** you'd need an Indian army that is much more highly trained than the current capital base allows**,** you need Indian generals that are much more risk taking than they currently are**,** and you need Indian politicians who are willing to tell their army that they're prepared to lose territory transiently if it results in more conclusive victories at the end of the war.

It's easy for people to say India should change its military model and do x and do y but when you look at the resources that India has to play with, the best you're going to get are marginal changes**,** so to my mind the current framework of the Indian military will persist not because they don't want to transform, but because they're very conscious of the fact that they don't have the materials which permit easy or effective transformation**.** Because they can't do easy and effective transformation, all that they are left with are essentially workarounds**.**

There are two things: first, they really need to increase the amount of resources that can be allocated to defense because at the end of the day everything that they want to do requires money, even modest transformations require money**,** and that immediately takes you to the Indian economy and its performance and so on and so forth. The second**,** and this to me is even working within sort of established organizations and existing systems, is to really move more resolutely towards jointness because jointness at least offers you the hope of recovering some economies from assets that you already have and avoiding needless duplication and so on and so forth.

But jointness, if it is to be effective, cannot be simply a military affair. You've got to have the civilians locked at the hip with the military in making this process happen. You can't tell the three services go out and develop a unified joint war fighting plan if the civilians don't understand what that joint warfighting plan is, or they discover the joint warfighting plan only on the eve of a conflict. You need to have civilians who are prepared and integrated in the process at every step along the way. Honestly, if you look at the current state of the Indian administrative services, the bureaucratic counter that mans the ministry of defense, how many IS officers would you find who feel comfortable enough to be able to opine in ways that are persuasive on military matters, such that their uniformed counterparts will take them seriously**?**

This is a very big question but if there are two things I would say**:** get back to making high growth a priority and and develop a plan for a sustained basis for military budget growth. It doesn't have to be big budget growth, but it has to be sustained**. I**t can't be boom and bust cycles which India excels in**.** Whenever there's a crisis people rush out and buy things**,** then they forget about the things that have been bought and so on and so forth**.** The second is focus on force transformation using the building blocks that you have but marrying them a little more effectively**.** That is not as easy to do as it sounds, but I think it's going to be the cheapest thing that India can do in the near term

Arzan: That's internal balancing, and there's no easy answer. Let's turn to external balancing. Let's take as the premise that internal balancing is very difficult, and to the extent that it can be done, takes a long time. This is especially true when it comes to economic gains from growth, military acquisitions, and planning, and a long process of increasing jointness. So, if that's the case, and we're not going to realize gains soon if at all, then what in the interim can external balancing – and here I'm speaking specifically to the relationship with the US – yield to India? What steps can India and the US take to fortify India or restore deterrence against China?

Ashley: I'm actually even more pessimistic on external balancing than I am on internal balancing. I'm pessimistic not because of US inhibitions, but because of very serious Indian inhibitions. The Indian idea of external balancing is very public consultations with the US on all matters under the sun. To my mind, that's very important, and the fact that we can do this in ways that we could not historically is a big achievement. But it's not the substance of what external balancing is about. External balancing is about developing the capacity for the US to come to India's assistance if required in an emergency. That's what external balancing means if it is to have any meaning. Consultations are free – diplomats will do this as a matter of course – but at the end of the day, if India is in a crisis and requires assistance, can that assistance be delivered in ways that are productive? We are nowhere near addressing that question. And we are nowhere near that because India first as a matter of principle believes that there is little that the US can do to help India with respect to its strategic problems. To my knowledge, this is first untrue, second reflects a failure of imagination, and third is not attentive to the US's enormous capabilities that it can deploy in short order if it chooses to.

So, what's the problem? The problem is that we have not put in place the building blocks that allow us to operate in a cooperative fashion. We have agreements that permit us to do so, but we have not acted on them. So to my mind, when we talk of external balancing, if it to be meaningful and go beyond arm waving, joint statements, and talk about great solidarity – that's good, I'm glad it's happening, and we should do more of it. I think diplomacy is very important. But I want to know what happens when diplomacy reaches its limits. And when diplomacy reaches its limits, the test of our friendship is going to be "what is it you can do to bail me out of the pickle that I find myself in?" In order to be able to do that, there is so much that we have to do by way of preparation. Somehow there is an Indian mindset that if things really come to a crunch, India will turn quickly and the US hopefully will come to its assistance through transfers of technology, equipment, and so on. But that's not the way it works. It's not a matter of simply transferring bits and pieces of equipment. We have to have communications and routines down pat. We've got to know more about each other's' forces, where they are located, what their doctrines are, and how they operate. So that if we ever have to do anything together, we can actually do it in short

notice. Crises are not the time to discover what your partners can and cannot do. This is a conversation that we need to begin now, and I don't see India as ready to have that conversation yet.

Arzan: You've been talking mostly in terms of preparing the ground in case the proverbial hits the rotational in case of crisis but what about in terms of the long-term strategic competition with China? What is it that the U.S. partnership can give India? You mentioned technology—is it about technology or is there a theory of success for how external relationships**,** especially with the United States—and I'll come to the Quad next—but can help India gain a leg up in the competition with China?

Ashley: There are many dimensions to this question because to my mind a very big part of the story ought to be economic**.** If you want to compete with China successfully, there must be much greater symbiosis between the United States and the Indian economies that exist today. You can pick any U.S. trade representative—Republican or Democrat—and ask them what they think about the prospects for greater integration of the U.S. and Indian economies and they will all scoff because they don't believe that India actually cares about integrating the two economies and that becomes one entire area of cooperation which sort of finds itself short shifted, but I think that is very important and we have to think about that issue anew and this means India needs to reflect on what its economic strategy is going to be, what integration it desires with the rest of the world, and especially with its friends—forget about the rest of the world and so on and so forth—and the good news here has been very slim on this issue.

Then you talk about the broader issues of geopolitics and strategy. That covers a range of things all the way from transfer of technologies to actual capacities of the two militaries to work together. Here I think there is a significant disjunction between Indian and U.S. objectives. India wants technology, and to a lesser degree it wants to benefit from expertise, so it wants to learn how the United States does things, how advanced military powers do things, but it wants to sort of get these in an à la carte fashion. Once it gets these it conveys that there's no further interest in cooperation, so "give us the tools we need, let us do the job, and everything else can wait until circumstances sort of prove their necessity," whereas for the United States it's very different. For us, the vision of partnership and balancing is that we actually operate together. This doesn't commit India to operating in advance, so we are very respectful in that sense of India's political choices. We're not saying, "you have to be like an alliance partner where you are committed to collective defense." No one's saying that, but they're saying that if in some circumstances we have to do even modest forms of collective defense then we will have already had to have put in place all the familiarization and all the operating routines that would allow us to execute that collective defense whether it's big or whether it's small when the time comes.

I think that is an area where we are so far away from at the moment that I sometimes despair that India's political inhibitions will perpetually prevent us from getting to that point. When I think of balancing, I think the real the real restraints are actually on the Indian side, not the U.S. side, because the U.S. side today appreciates that China is going to be a generational problem and the United States of 2021 is not the United States of 1945. We cannot do this except through a coalition, which means that you must have partners willing to step up to the plate. We've got the Japanese there and we've got the Australians there, but that's only two of three major Asian powers. Where's the third? With the third I think we've made enormous progress. I don't want to underestimate that for a moment since 1998, but we are nowhere near where we are with our other partnerships.

If I can get India to the point where we are with Singapore, I would consider it a huge leap forward. Singapore is a great example because Singapore is not an ally of the United States and yet the intensity of cooperation that we have with Singapore in the area of economics and in the area of the military is absolutely spectacular and I think that is a very nice model to keep in mind when we think of the U.S.-India relationship going forward. There is a desire, particularly with the Indo-Pacific construct, for the United States to rely more and more on India, to hope that India will actually take responsibility, particularly for the Northern Indian Ocean and, if possible, other parts of the Indian ocean as well. But

between India's constraints at home and its still quite strong political reservations even with a pro-United States Prime Ministers as we've had in the past—Manmohan Singh and now Prime Minister Modi—we still have not been able to break through these inhibitions that have prevented us from getting to where we imagined we would be.

Arzan: Speaking of inhibitions and high-fiving each other after a deal is done and not having a long-term plan, let's turn to something you've alluded to—the Quad. I mentioned it before, everyone was pretty pleased when the announcement was made, and the first serial of the four-party Malabar exercise happened. The Quad itself as strategic consultation has gotten bigger and pretty routinized at the ministerial level now, so it seems to be at least at that level durable. But the question I have is**,** how materially and practically important is it as a tool of, using the phrase you use, collective defense or collective deterrence? Can the Quad hope to deter China any more than the four individual parties? Is the whole greater than the sum of its parts and what is the aim point for the Quad that you think is both meaningful but also realistic?

Ashley: The word is realism. We've certainly taken important steps forward in terms of routinizing and institutionalizing consultations**,** but let's not make more of the Quad than it actually is**.** It is a forum for consultations and that's all it is now. Because it has the relevant players at the table, that's a big achievement because it's an important mechanism for signaling to China that the big players in Asia essentially are of one mind with respect to managing China and that is not an inconsiderable achievement and we should not underplay it, but we have not yet reached the point where the Quad can go beyond that.

Two things have to happen for the Quad to be able to go beyond that. First, the United States has bilateral alliance relationships with Japan and with Australia. These are separate alliance relationships, and they are for all practical purposes unidirectional alliance relationships; that is, the United States is committed to the defense of its allies, but its allies are not obligated to come to America's defense. If the Quad is to become something more than just a forum for consultations, first we will have to revise the character of our own alliance arrangements and this does not require us to go out and renegotiate sort of foundational texts, but there needs to be a greater willingness on the part of both our Australian and our Japanese partners to do things for us, just as there's an expectation that we will do things for them now. Australia has really been the most remarkable example of this cup because in every war that we have fought since World War II, Australians have fought with Americans, so there's no hesitation there and we don't think that that's going to change in the future. Japan is undergoing a transformation that I think at least some leaders in Japan would like to get it there where it begins to do things for the United States and not just simply become the recipient of American protection, but we still have some ways to go. But that to my mind is the first set of arrangements that will have to be rethought.

Then there's the second one and this is the biggest and, in many ways, the hardest one, which is, would India be willing to be part of some collective arrangements for defense? Collective defense is really the acme. It's the apotheosis of the entire project. I don't expect that India will sign on to collective defense anytime soon, but even if India is willing to engage in activities of cooperation or at the operational level in a piecemeal fashion, that would be a huge step forward. We've taken some baby steps in this direction, particularly with respect to the Indian navy, but the Indian navy is a boutique force, and it operates sort of out of sight and out of mind of Indian policy makers, so that's been easy, but it's been harder to do with the other Indian armed forces and institutions, like the intelligence services and all the various agencies that India has in the national security space, but I think that's where we have to go.

For the foreseeable future the Quad is going to remain consultative and there's no harm if it remains consultative for the entire duration of its existence. The trouble is going to arise if it gives the impression that it is more than just consultative because then you get the worst of both worlds. It's going to alarm the Chinese and they're going to react and the Quad will be incapable of dealing with that reaction

because in its constitution it simply does not have the capacity for cooperative pushback against China that it matters. When I emphasized and underscored the word you used, which was realism, I think we need to be careful about how we talk about the Quad and I think this administration actually may have gone overboard in investing the Quad with these mythical powers. I think it's an important innovation and I hope the Biden administration pays attention to it and invests in it, but to my mind the Quad is not a substitute for doubling down on U.S. alliances and updating U.S. alliances to meet the new threat. To my mind, that is the nucleus of America's defense and it would be crazy for us to pursue a 'will o' the wisp' elsewhere if in the process we end up sacrificing our own alliances.

Arzan: Absolutely, that makes eminently good sense because I think everyone gets very excited when they hear about this idea that's going to ride in on a white horse and save us all but, clearly, it's only just begun. If you put it in this framework of a collective defense institution, it's nowhere near that, so let me in the last couple of minutes we've got, turn to a couple of questions for the near term. We've already spoken a lot about the future, but let's talk a little bit about the immediate future. You just now mentioned the Biden administration which, again, assuming things turn out normally and there is a Biden administration

A two-part question: First, the Biden administration, I think people would agree, will return the United States to a more mainstream posture—one that is dominated by what some would call the blob in Washington. But you have mentioned recently that the blob in Washington is increasingly convinced of and realistic about India's limitations. The first question is what then does that mean for how the Biden administration approaches India, one that is more attuned to realistic constraints? Secondly, President-elect Biden has spoken about this idea of rejuvenating a democratic coalition or alliance around the world to maintain order and yet you have written about the dangers of India's creeping illiberalism in taking some enthusiasm away from America's approach to India. How do you reconcile that? What does the Biden administration's approach to India look like? One that is more cognizant of India's material limitations and also more skeptical of its illiberal tendencies?

Ashley: Let me start with the first. I think the Biden administration would be well served in continuing the traditions of its predecessors with respect to the India relationship**,** which is continuing to invest in India, continuing to strengthen it, because doing so is an American national interest. No one is in any two minds about that, but what I think needs to be done is that we should not have extravagant expectations of India. That's where we sort of get carried away. When the Indians tell us that they're not interested in an alliance relationship we ought to take that seriously. With all its remote implications that means that by definition the areas that we partner will necessarily be constrained because there are things that we will do with our allies that we don't do with anyone else. If India chooses not to be part of an American alliance relationship, either formal or informal, it's a choice that we should respect and then we should understand that that immediately limits the things that we will do with India.

I think India also needs to appreciate that for itself, so that it can make a better judgment about where it wants to cooperate and where it doesn't. Very often what worries me is that our rhetoric gets the better of our policies. For example, when the administration made the decision to give India STA-1 status, there was a general expectation that the floodgates of American technology are now going to be open to India and India will get technologies that its NATO partners get as a matter of routine. That is a complete exaggeration because what STA-1 in effect did was it said that India would be eligible for technologies that its NATO partners have access to, but it does not commit the United States to sharing those technologies with India, and as a matter of practice, the United States has not shared those technologies with countries that it does not work with in the field. There are reasons relating to operational security, there are reasons relating to protecting our advantages vis-a-vis both adversaries and bystanders, and so on and so forth. That's not going to change simply because India has been given part of STA-1 status.

We get carried away and we sort of interpret these things in rather pollyannish terms and I don't think it helps either India or the United States. In that sense, I think a little realism is called for. This doesn't mean that we don't pay attention to India, we don't work with India. I think we should work with India as closely as we can, we should assist it as closely as you can, but with the full knowledge that as long as India decides that it does not want an affiliation of the United States that resembles that enjoyed by the allies there will be clear constraints on what we can share and I think we need to be transparent and honest in conveying that to our to our Indian colleagues.

On the second question of a democratic alliance, I think there's a value in doing it, but there's a danger in it over investing in it. I'm very old-fashioned in these things. At the end of the day, our policies are driven fundamentally by our interests. It's not that our values don't matter, they do, but if values and interests collide, chances are that interests will win. We should assemble the world's democracies in any form they can. We should work with them in every forum we can, but I don't think that an institution that is constructed on the basis of just democratic solidarity will be the answer to our strategic problems.

We will have many democracies who will join such an assembly, but what is it that they will do when it comes to hard-nosed questions of competition with China? When it comes to limiting Russian malfeasance? When it comes to constraining North Korea's recklessness? There's very little now. This doesn't mean that you jettison democratic solidarity and that you don't work with fellow democracies—you work with them because to the degree that you can shape them to be mutually supportive and mutually reinforcing, we all come out ahead, but I don't think a democratic coalition is the answer to our strategic problems going forward except in a very loose sense—in an important sense but not in an indispensable sense.

Arzan: Final question: We've covered pretty much the waterfront on issues relating to the strategic competition going forward but in case we haven't, I want to ask you give you a chance to think if there are any wild cards that we have not been paying attention to, that we should be paying attention to, that could change the course of the India-China competition in the meantime?

Ashley: There are two wild cards that I can think of: one positive and one negative. The negative one is the recurrence of even more damaging pandemics that could be on the horizon. COVID-19 has been costly, and it has taken an enormous toll, not least of which in the United States, but still at the end of the day we've sort of gotten off lightly because we've managed to keep the casualties… they could have been far worse. The virus itself does not seem to be lethal across populations indiscriminately—age makes a difference, previous therapeutic preparations make a difference, and so on and so forth—but we could have viruses in the future that could be truly catastrophic in that they destroy the natural endowments that countries take for granted, huge losses of population, and so on and so forth. If that happens, the future of global politics is going to be very different because even advanced powers could suffer in ways that would really crimp their capacity to regenerate and I worry about that because to my mind the COVID-19 thing has been the most painful eye opener of exactly that kind of a possibility.

The more positive wild card is that after almost two decades of lethargy and debate, India has finally woken up to reform and Prime Minister Modi has been pushing very important reforms despite the controversy. I'm hopeful that if the crises facing India are seen as severe enough, that will catalyze enough political moment within the country to surprise us in a good way once again, and that goes back to the question you asked me right at the very beginning, which is, “is India losing?” The fact that India has begun to sort of pick up the pieces of reform and begun to think seriously about these opportunities gives me a hope that all is not lost. There's obviously much more to be done and the Prime Minister's rhetoric and the Prime Minister's policies have to become more closely aligned with the realities—that's the task he has—but I'm hopeful that if India can sort of crack that code, it could go back to becoming a high-performing economy. That would change our entire attitude to India in ways that I think would be productive and profitable for both sides, so I'm still hopeful on the India story.