

India's China strategy after Galwan: minilateral and multilateral soft balancing in the Indo-Pacific

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During the night of 15–16 June 2020, in the Galwan Valley on the disputed frontier between India and China, Indian troops engaged in hand-to-hand combat with soldiers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Both sides incurred casualties. New Delhi later acknowledged that twenty of its soldiers died, while Beijing conceded that four perished on its side.¹ In the aftermath of the clash, India and China came closer to war than they had been for half a century.² Over the next 18 months, as both countries deployed large forces into the border areas, further skirmishes took place along the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC), including incidents in which shots were fired.³

This episode was a watershed in the bilateral relationship and it signalled—at least in the view of the Government of India—the end of an understanding about how to manage the LAC.⁴ Moreover, it prompted India to radically revise its China strategy.⁵ To defend territory and deter further incursions, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi ordered the year-round deployment of 50–60,000 troops to the frontier, where earlier it had maintained a lighter presence only in the warmer months.⁶ In parallel, India adjusted its diplomatic posture. On 17 June 2020, Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar informed his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi that India considered the Galwan clash the result of 'pre-meditated and

* I am grateful to the editors and the reviewers for their assistance in clarifying the arguments in this article and to my colleagues Huiyun Feng and Kai He, who unknowingly prompted me to look more closely at India's soft balancing behaviour.

¹ 'China reveals four soldiers killed in June 2020 border clash with India', Reuters, 19 Feb. 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-China-India-border-idUSKBN2AJo4B>. See also Prabhaskar K. Dutta, '45 Chinese soldiers died in Galwan, reports Russian news agency TASS', *India Today*, 11 Feb. 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/45-Chinese-soldiers-died-in-galwan-reports-Russian-news-agency-tass-1768175-2021-02-11>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 28 May 2025.)

² An Indian officer later observed 'we were absolutely on the brink of war' (quoted in Arzan Tarapore, 'The crisis after the crisis: how Ladakh will shape India's competition with China', Lowy Institute, 5 May 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/crisis-after-crisis-how-ladakh-will-shape-india-s-competition-china>).

³ 'China says Indian troops fired "provocative" shots in border dispute', BBC News, 8 Sept. 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-54067400>.

⁴ Rup Narayan Das, 'The Galwan clash: a landmark change in India–China relations', *Global Asia* 16: 2, 2021, pp. 78–85. On the wider context, see Sumit Ganguly, Manjeet S. Pardesi and William R. Thompson, *The Sino-Indian rivalry: implications for global order* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

⁵ Vijay Gokhale, *The road from Galwan: the future of India–China relations* (Washington DC and New Delhi: Carnegie India, 2021), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Gokhale_Galwan.pdf, p. 3.

⁶ See Tarapore, 'The crisis after the crisis'.

planned action' by the PLA in violation of longstanding agreements, designed to change the status quo.⁷ Beijing was told that until it respected those rules and returned to the status quo ante, India would not consider itself bound by them. Nor would India adhere to the broader understanding, formed in the late 1980s, that the two countries should ring-fence the border dispute and cooperate where they could in other areas.⁸ 'We are [now] very clear', Jaishankar stated, that 'maintaining peace and tranquillity ... along the Line of Actual Control is the basis for the rest of the relationship to progress'.⁹

In practice, however, India could not end all diplomatic interaction with China. Both countries belong to multiple multilateral institutions and minilateral groupings with ongoing commitments that would be hard to abandon.¹⁰ Yet, as this article shows, India has demonstrated that these groupings have uses beyond cooperation. Since the Galwan crisis, India has used several such forums to 'soft balance' against China. In the Russia–India–China (RIC) trilateral; the BRICS grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa; the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a treaty-based multilateral regional security institution; and with the India–Brazil–South Africa (IBSA) trilateral, India has sought to undermine China's power and frustrate its government's agendas. This behaviour—involving 'conscious constraints on cooperation' and soft balancing—is both deliberate and consistent with India's view that the bilateral relationship is 'abnormal'.¹¹

This article argues that analysing this behaviour provides new insights into India's post-Galwan China strategy beyond New Delhi's changed force posture on the LAC, declared diplomatic position, restrictions on trade, investment and movement, and strengthening of strategic partnerships inside and outside the Quad (the Indo-Pacific minilateral comprising Australia, India, Japan and the United States), all of which have been discussed in detail elsewhere.¹² It shows India moving further away from the 'evasive balancing' employed in the 2010s, complementing internal 'hard balancing' and external 'zone balancing' with soft balancing.¹³

⁷ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 'Phone call between External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar and Foreign Minister of China, H.E. Mr. Wang Yi', Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 17 June 2020, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32765>.

⁸ Jeff M. Smith, *Cold peace: China–India rivalry in the twenty-first century* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), p. 30.

⁹ See Jaishankar's comments from 32:10 min to 32:30 min in Michael Fullilove, 'In conversation with India's External Affairs Minister Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar', Lowy Institute, 9 Dec. 2020, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/news-and-media/multimedia/video/conversation-india-s-external-affairs-minister-dr-subrahmanyam>.

¹⁰ Minilaterals are informal groupings of small numbers of states using ad hoc arrangements to address transnational governance problems. See Megan Dee, 'Minilateralism and effective multilateralism in the global nuclear order', *Contemporary Security Policy* 45: 3, 2024, pp. 494–524 at pp. 503–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2024.2373658>.

¹¹ S. Jaishankar, *Why Bharat matters* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2024), pp. xviii and 3.

¹² Kanti Bajpai, 'India's emerging grand strategy after Galwan: bridging the power gap with China', in International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Asia–Pacific regional security assessment: key developments and trends 2021* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 61–76.

¹³ Rajesh Rajagopalan, 'Evasive balancing: India's unviable Indo–Pacific strategy', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 75–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz224>; Arzan Tarapore, 'Zone balancing: India and the Quad's new strategic logic', *International Affairs* 99: 1, 2023, pp. 239–57, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaac281>.

The next section revisits the literature on soft balancing to review why states do it, what they aim to achieve by it and how this behaviour differs from routine negotiation in international relations. The remainder of the article analyses what can be discerned from official statements and media briefings, as well as public comment and analysis about New Delhi's soft balancing tactics in four multilateral and minilateral forums. It explores India's use of denial in the RIC, delay in the BRICS, trivialization in the SCO and exclusion by reviving the IBSA grouping on the sidelines of the Group of 20 (G20). The conclusion summarizes the implications for our understandings of India's China strategy and for soft balancing.

Soft balancing revisited

Robert Pape defines 'soft balancing' as the use of 'nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine' a target state in ways that 'delay, complicate, or increase the costs' of that state using its power.¹⁴ This might involve, as T.V. Paul argues, 'coalition building and diplomatic bargaining within international institutions, short of formal bilateral and multilateral military alliances'.¹⁵ States or groups of states might seek to constrain a target by the imposition of norms and rules; the public shaming of their behaviour; the redirection of institutional agendas; or even their exclusion from membership of an organization, regime or treaty.¹⁶ Outside formal institutions, states can also soft balance using strategic partnerships and informal minilaterals, developing shared diplomatic and normative agendas, economic and technological engagement, or defence and security cooperation designed to soft balance the power of target states.¹⁷

States use soft balancing when they perceive the costs of building countervailing hard power or constructing a counter-hegemonic coalition as excessive. It is an attractive strategy, Kai He and Huiyun Feng argue, 'under the conditions of anarchy and high economic interdependence', where there is a risk of both war and incurring significant economic losses, and where there is a marked disparity in power between a stronger and a weaker state.¹⁸ In such situations, hard balancing will likely deliver only marginal gains for both stronger and weaker states. The ability of the stronger party to coerce the weaker would not be markedly enhanced

¹⁴ Robert A. Pape, 'Soft balancing against the United States', *International Security* 30: 1, 2005, pp. 7–45 at p. 10 and p. 17, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894607>.

¹⁵ T.V. Paul, 'Soft balancing in the age of U.S. primacy', *International Security* 30: 1, 2005, pp. 46–71 at p. 58, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894652>.

¹⁶ See, *inter alia*, Kei Koga, 'ASEAN's evolving institutional strategy: managing great power politics in South China Sea disputes', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11: 1, 2018, pp. 49–80, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pox016>; Anders Wivel and T.V. Paul, 'Maximizing security through international institutions: soft balancing strategies reconsidered', in Anders Wivel and T.V. Paul, eds, *International institutions and power politics: bridging the divide* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), pp. 92–3; and Seungjoo Lee, 'Institutional balancing and the politics of mega-FTAs in east Asia', *Asian Survey* 56: 6, 2016, pp. 1055–76, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2016.56.6.1055>.

¹⁷ H. D. P. Envall and Ian Hall, 'Asian strategic partnerships: new practices and regional security governance', *Asian Politics and Policy* 8: 1, 2016, pp. 87–105, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12241>. See also Weiqing Song, 'Feeling safe, being strong: China's strategy of soft balancing through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization', *International Politics* 50: 5, 2013, pp. 664–85, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2013.21>.

¹⁸ Kai He and Huiyun Feng, 'If not soft balancing, then what? Reconsidering soft balancing and U.S. policy toward China', *Security Studies* 17: 2, 2008, pp. 363–95 at pp. 365 and 372, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410802098776>.

by hard balancing, nor would the capacity of the weaker party to deter the stronger.¹⁹ For both, soft balancing is thus a rational alternative.

Some critics argue that soft balancing is just a 'portentous-sounding term to describe conventional policy disputes and diplomatic bargaining'.²⁰ They contend that proponents wrongly characterize as soft balancing everyday efforts to advance economic interests or address security concerns, as well as spillovers from everyday domestic political competition between interest groups. Yet these arguments are contestable. He and Feng argue that critics often mistake tactics for strategy or dismiss—without good reason—public statements by avowed soft balancers as 'cheap talk'.²¹ They sometimes conflate soft balancing with interstate negotiation, but they are distinct activities.

Balancing—hard and soft—is aimed at reducing vulnerabilities, enhancing capabilities, building leverage and constraining a target's ability to use its power.²² In other words, like hard balancing, soft balancing seeks to better position one's own state and undermine that of one's target, perhaps but not necessarily with a view to later negotiations.²³ To be sure, it can also signal concern, resolve or intent. But soft balancing—again like hard balancing—is aimed primarily at improving one's situation and degrading the target's situation, changing the balance of power and the circumstances in which a negotiation might take place. As Weifeng Zhou and Mario Esteban argue, a major objective of soft balancing efforts like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is boosting Beijing's relative bargaining power so that interests can be more easily advanced in the future.²⁴ Like hard balancing, soft balancing may prepare the ground for talks but does not substitute for them. Similarly, soft balancing may pressure a target state to commit to a negotiation process to arrest the decline in their relative power or to try to regain it, but it is distinct from negotiation.²⁵

Soft balancing practised

Others have already observed India balancing China's power in various ways and in various settings before and after the Galwan clash, as New Delhi sought to shore up its own position and constrain Beijing in preparation for conflict or for negotiations to de-escalate their dispute.²⁶ But we still lack a complete picture of

¹⁹ He and Feng, 'If not soft balancing, then what?', p. 375.

²⁰ Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, 'Hard times for soft balancing', *International Security* 30: 1, 2005, pp. 72–108 at p. 76, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894634>.

²¹ He and Feng, 'If not soft balancing, then what?', pp. 367–70.

²² Daniel H. Nexon, 'The balance of power in the balance', *World Politics* 61: 2, 2009, pp. 330–59 at pp. 341–7, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000124>.

²³ Nicole Deitelhoff and Linda Wallbott, 'Beyond soft balancing: small states and coalition-building in the ICC and climate negotiations', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25: 3, 2012, pp. 345–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2012.710580>.

²⁴ Weifeng Zhou and Mario Esteban, 'Beyond balancing: China's approach towards the Belt and Road Initiative', *Journal of Contemporary China* 27: 112, 2018, pp. 487–501, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1433476>.

²⁵ The conventional view is that negotiation is 'the sequence of actions in which two or more parties address demands and proposals to each other' in a diplomatic setting. John S. Odell, *Negotiating the world economy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 10.

²⁶ Rajagopalan, 'Evasive balancing'; Gunjan Singh, 'India's military modernisation in the shadow of the

India's behaviour. This article argues that one important missing piece is India's soft balancing of China within multilateral and minilateral groupings of which both are members—in the RIC, the BRICS, the SCO and with IBSA in the G20—indeed, within almost all the significant forums to which India and China both belong.²⁷ In all of them, India has tried in recent years to balance China's power, albeit by employing different tactics in each.²⁸ These tactics are designed to undermine Beijing's ability to pursue its interests in each forum.

As we have seen, it would not be irrational for New Delhi to do this: it is the weaker party of the two and stands to lose much from armed conflict with China and from major disruptions to bilateral trade and investment flows. Soft balancing is a lower-risk strategy for boosting relative power and delivering greater potential leverage than hard balancing by means of a rapid military build-up or the formation of alliances. What is more puzzling is India's use of different soft balancing tactics in each of the four groupings examined below. Yet close analysis of this behaviour, this article argues, shows not only that India's soft balancing is deliberate, but also that it is calibrated in different contexts to maximize its effect on its target and to minimize damage to other relationships that India values.

To make this case, the following sections examine India's behaviour since the Galwan crisis in the RIC, the BRICS, the SCO and with IBSA in the G20 through the analysis of contemporary official statements; publicly available interviews with key actors, especially the minister of external affairs; and media reporting and commentary, as well as the available scholarship. Particular attention is paid to India's willingness to engage with the grouping by attending meetings; the level of representation; the framing of the discussions by Indian government sources or influential media outlets; the agendas proposed by New Delhi and the talking points addressed; the outcomes agreed; and the available evidence for the intended and actual effects of India's actions. These measures are used to describe and categorize the soft balancing tactics used and to draw reasonable inferences as to why New Delhi may have selected each specific tactic in each forum.

In the RIC, as the following sections argue, India has used denial, preventing meaningful discussion by refusing to hold meetings or refusing to issue joint statements, indicating irritation with Moscow as well as Beijing. In the BRICS, it

China threat', *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 10: 3, 2023, pp. 277–300, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970231207249>; Tarapore, 'Zone balancing'.

²⁷ The others are the East Asia Summit and the United Nations. The former was excluded because in recent years neither China nor India has made much use of it to advance their interests. See Chietigj Bajpae, 'Reinvigorating India's "Act East" policy in an age of renewed power politics', *Pacific Review* 36: 3, 2023, pp. 631–61 at p. 645, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2110609>; and Mark Beeson, 'Multilateralism in east Asia: less than the sum of its parts?', *Global Summitry* 2: 1, 2016, pp. 54–70 at pp. 62–3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/global/guw007>. The latter was excluded because others (notably Vijay Gokhale, *The long game: how the Chinese negotiate with India* (New Delhi: Vintage, 2021)) have analysed India–China interactions in that setting in detail. The other groupings of which one or the other are members, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation or the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation mechanism, can only be used for indirect soft balancing.

²⁸ Here this article makes the distinction between strategy (i.e. a plan to achieve an objective) and tactics (i.e. the actions taken to implement that plan). It follows the literature in distinguishing between soft balancing strategies and the tactics used to implement them. See, for example, Chaka Ferguson, 'The strategic use of soft balancing: the normative dimensions of the Chinese–Russian "strategic partnership"', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35: 2, 2012, pp. 197–222 at pp. 202 and 206–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.583153>.

has used delay, slow-walking negotiations on issues China would like to advance without unduly alienating other partners within the forum. In the SCO, it has used trivialization, setting agendas far removed from China's key concerns and signalling its unhappiness about Beijing's influence over the institution. Finally, India has used exclusion in the G20, forging ahead without China's participation by reviving the hitherto moribund IBSA grouping, while seeking to minimize damage to the G20 itself and to its own ability to pursue its interests under its auspices.

Denying the RIC

The RIC trilateral was one of the very first minilaterals. Its origins can be traced back to 1998, to then-Russian foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov's proposal to create a Russia–India–China 'strategic triangle' to soft balance the US.²⁹ At that time, India was wary of the idea, partly because it mistrusted China and partly because it wanted a new entente with the US.³⁰ But in 2002 New Delhi agreed to a watered-down version: informal foreign minister-level discussions with Russia and China at the United Nations.³¹ Four years later, it consented to a leaders' summit hosted by Russian President Vladimir Putin, but no agreement was reached on further meetings.³² Instead, India agreed with China and Russia to continue regular discussions between their foreign ministers and—where appropriate—to issue joint communiqués.³³

The RIC achieved little else for about a decade, as the BRICS (formed in 2006) and the SCO (founded in 2001) emerged as bigger concerns for all three countries.³⁴ In 2018 and 2019, however, it returned to the fore, not as an instrument of soft balancing but as a forum for crisis management. In mid-2017, a six-week standoff took place between Chinese and Indian troops at Doklam, in a disputed area of Bhutan, during which Beijing repeatedly threatened wider military action.³⁵ The confrontation unsettled the Modi government, which sought ways to re-engage Beijing. These included two 'informal' bilateral meetings between Modi and Chinese president Xi Jinping in Wuhan and Chennai and two Russia-brokered RIC summits on the sidelines of the G20 in Buenos Aires in 2018 and Osaka in 2019.³⁶

²⁹ Thomas Ambrosio, 'The third side? The multipolar strategic triangle and the Sino-Indian rapprochement', *Comparative Strategy* 24: 5, 2005, pp. 397–414 at pp. 399–402, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930500448863>.

³⁰ Bobo Lo, *New order for old triangles? The Russia–China–India matrix* (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, Russia/NIS Center, 2017), <https://www.ifri.org/en/papers/new-order-old-triangles-russia-china-india-matrix>, pp. 8–9.

³¹ Chen Dongxiao and Feng Shuai, 'The Russia–India–China trio in the changing international system', *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 2: 4, 2016, pp. 431–47 at p. 432, <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740016500275>.

³² Frank O'Donnell and Mihaela Papa, 'India's multi-alignment management and the Russia–India–China (RIC) triangle', *International Affairs* 97: 3 2021, pp. 801–22 at p. 801, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab036>.

³³ Chen and Feng, 'The Russia–India–China trio', p. 438.

³⁴ See Chen and Feng, 'The Russia–India–China trio'.

³⁵ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, 'Russia–India–China trilateral grouping: more than hype?', *The Diplomat*, 5 July 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/Russia-India-China-trilateral-grouping-more-than-hype>. On Doklam, see Kanti Bajpai, 'Modi's China policy and the road to confrontation', *Pacific Affairs* 91: 2, 2018, pp. 245–60, <https://doi.org/10.5509/2018912245>.

³⁶ Vinay Kaura, 'India's relations with China from the Doklam crisis to the Galwan tragedy', *India Quarterly*

After that, however, no further leaders' summits were convened. A virtual RIC foreign ministers' meeting was held barely a week after the Galwan clash in June 2020, but no joint communiqué was issued. Instead, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov addressed a press conference without his Chinese and Indian counterparts.³⁷ A further foreign ministers' meeting occurred in Moscow on 10 September 2020 but produced only a press release.³⁸ India then took over the RIC chair and there was a long delay before the next meeting. When it did take place, on 26 November 2021, it was online. A 4,000-word joint communiqué was published, noting that the foreign ministers had 'exchanged views on further strengthening' the RIC, but no specific details were offered.³⁹ During 2022 and 2023, with China and Russia in the chair, there was only one more trilateral foreign ministers' meeting—an informal discussion on the sidelines of an SCO summit in May 2023. No further formal event was convened.⁴⁰

What explains these changes? The evidence suggests that the reason for this sudden loss of momentum in the RIC trilateral was Indian obstruction. Scheduling constraints and the pandemic are not sufficient to explain the failure to hold meetings or issue joint statements. New Delhi was able to find time for many others between 2020 and 2023. Yet Moscow's calls for leader-, foreign minister- or defence minister-level meetings during this period—some made with Chinese support⁴¹—were not heeded. Late in 2021, for example, Putin offered to arrange a summit 'to break the ice' between China and India.⁴² In September 2022 Russia's ambassador to India proposed reviving the RIC to boost 'mutual understanding, trust and stability' between the three countries.⁴³ But neither suggestion met with a positive response from New Delhi.

The RIC stalled because the Indian government denied the forum to China. It refused to meet to signal unhappiness with Beijing's behaviour and to avoid the possibility that China might represent a meeting as a signal of a thaw in relations.

76: 4, 2020, pp. 501–18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928420961768>. See also Gokhale, *The road from Galwan*. Gokhale was India's ambassador to China during the Doklam crisis.

³⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions during a news conference following the video conference of foreign ministers of Russia, India and China, Moscow, June 23, 2020', 23 June 2020, https://archive.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/4171520. Lavrov announced a new trilateral defence ministers' meeting, but no agreement was published, and no such meeting took place between 2020 and 2024 (see O'Donnell and Papa, 'India's multi-alignment management', p. 802).

³⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Joint press release of Russia–India–China foreign ministers, Moscow, September 10, 2020', 10 Sept. 2020, <https://www.mid.ru/tv/?id=1441768&lang=en>.

³⁹ Embassy of India, Moscow, 'Joint communiqué of the 18th meeting of the foreign ministers of the Russian Federation, the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China, November 26, 2021', 26 Nov. 2021, <https://indianembassy-moscow.gov.in/press-releases-26-11-2021-1.php>.

⁴⁰ Al Jazeera, 'India meets with China, Russia on sidelines of SCO summit', 4 May 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/4/india-meets-with-china-russia-on-sidelines-of-sco-summit>.

⁴¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Remarks by State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the video conference of RIC foreign ministers', 23 June 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/3265_665445/3220_664352/3221_664354/202406/t20240611_11423161.html.

⁴² Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 'Russian President Vladimir Putin seeks to break ice between India and China', *Economic Times*, 17 Dec. 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/russian-president-vladimir-putin-seeks-to-break-ice-between-india-and-china/articleshow/88330760.cms>.

⁴³ Press Trust of India, 'Russia–India–China trilateral has incredible potential for cooperation: Russian envoy', *NDTV World*, 4 Sept. 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/russia-india-china-trilateral-has-incredible-potential-for-cooperation-russian-envoy-3314541>.

This denial was consistent with its post-Galwan policy of refusing to negotiate with Beijing until the status quo ante was restored on the LAC. When asked, Indian officials were plain on this point. In March 2023, for example, an external affairs ministry spokesperson observed:

The RIC has not met for some time due to changed realities in India's own neighbourhood and the wider world. Any decision to have the RIC meeting would have to take these into account. Specifically, the situation at the Chinese border needs to be normalised before the meetings can be held.⁴⁴

With the RIC, India used arguably the simplest soft balancing tactic: denying the forum to a rival. But as the same anonymous official observed: 'Chinese aggression at the border has affected a range of multilateral efforts ... not only the RIC'.⁴⁵ As the next section shows, this included the BRICS forum, where New Delhi took a different approach: delaying agreement on one of Beijing's core concerns, the expansion of BRICS membership.

Delaying the BRICS

The BRIC grouping—South Africa and the 'S' were added later, in 2010—began as an informal foreign ministers' meeting at the UN in 2006. Three years later, the first leaders' summit was convened, as the members looked to reform global economic governance in the aftermath of the 2007–2008 global financial crisis.⁴⁶ At this point, India was enthusiastic about the latter project and about the BRICS too, as it offered various benefits: a status marker acknowledging India's rising power; a hedge against a deterioration in ties with the US; an instrument for gauging Chinese intentions and cooperating with Beijing in areas of mutual interest; and a friendlier source of development financing than the World Bank.⁴⁷ Moreover, before and especially after the Doklam standoff, the BRICS—like the RIC trilateral—was perceived as a useful mechanism for managing differences with China.⁴⁸

Unlike the RIC, however, New Delhi continued to use the BRICS in this specific way in the wake of the Galwan crisis. During 2020 and 2021, as it did after Doklam, India used the forum to engage Beijing in the hope of de-escalating the situation on the LAC. In September 2020 India participated in both the BRICS foreign ministers' and national security advisers' meetings. Prior to the first, Indian foreign minister Jaishankar issued a carefully worded statement saying that he hoped to have a 'reasonable chat' with his Chinese counterpart and that 'agreements and understanding [*sic*] with China' were 'scrupulously observed by both

⁴⁴ Majid Alam, 'India unlikely to participate in RIC meet until border situation with China normalises: report', News18, 8 March 2023, <https://www.news18.com/world/India-unlikely-to-participate-in-ric-meet-until-border-situation-with-China-normalises-report-7246279.html>.

⁴⁵ Alam, 'India unlikely to participate'.

⁴⁶ Andrew F. Cooper, *The BRICS: a very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁴⁷ Raj Kumar Sharma, 'BRICS in India's vision for global governance', in Harsh V. Pant, ed., *India and global governance: a rising power and its discontents* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 135–45.

⁴⁸ Sreeram Chaulia, 'In spite of the spite: an Indian view of China and India in BRICS', *Global Policy* 12: 4, 2021, pp. 519–23, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13009>.

parties'.⁴⁹ Modi then attended the BRICS leaders' summit which was convened online by Russia in November 2020, having been postponed from July of that year by the COVID-19 pandemic. India's disagreements with Beijing were kept quiet at the meeting, which focused on the pandemic and its economic impact as well as the shared challenge of terrorism, and no attempt was reportedly made to block a joint statement.⁵⁰

In 2021, India took over the chair of the forum and persisted with this restrained approach, only obliquely criticizing Beijing. At the foreign ministers' meeting in early June, Jaishankar reminded members of the principles they were meant to affirm, including 'sovereign equality' and 'territorial integrity'. He warned that the BRICS could only bring about lasting change in global governance if its members respected these principles. But Jaishankar did not single out any particular member for criticism.⁵¹ It was clear that New Delhi wanted to further its interests within the BRICS and perceived that to be possible, despite Sino-Indian tensions. To that end, India advanced a series of proposals to strengthen political, security, economic, financial and cultural ties, as well as pressing the case for more action on counterterrorism.⁵²

In 2022, however, China chaired the BRICS and India's approach changed. Soon after the handover, it was suggested that Modi might not attend the leaders' meeting to be hosted by his Chinese counterpart.⁵³ In response, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi went to New Delhi in March to meet Jaishankar and secure a promise that Modi would travel to the summit. He was rebuffed. Wang declared that China wanted a 'return to normalcy' in the bilateral relationship. Jaishankar replied bluntly that the present situation was 'not normal' and would remain 'abnormal' until China pulled back on the LAC.⁵⁴ The issue of Modi's attendance at the summit was left unresolved. Then, at the virtual foreign ministers' meeting in May—with reports circulating in the Indian media about Chinese infrastructure-building on the LAC⁵⁵—Jaishankar again called on members to respect sovereign equality and territorial integrity.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Nayanima Basu, 'Have known Chinese foreign minister for long, solution lies in diplomacy, Jaishankar says', *The Print*, 3 Sept. 2020, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/have-known-chinese-foreign-minister-for-long-solution-lies-in-diplomacy-jaishankar-says/495395>.

⁵⁰ Narendra Modi, 'There is a need to ensure that countries supporting and assisting terrorists are held guilty: PM Modi', address to BRICS summit, 17 Nov. 2020, <https://www.narendramodi.in/text-of-prime-minister-narendra-modi-s-opening-remarks-at-virtual-brics-summit-2020>. See also 'XII BRICS summit Moscow declaration', BRICS Information Centre, 17 Nov. 2020, <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/20117-moscow-declaration.html>.

⁵¹ Naveen Kapoor, 'India says BRICS guided by sovereign equality of all states, respect for territorial integrity', ANI, 1 June 2021, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/india-says-brics-guided-by-sovereign-equality-of-all-states-respect-for-territorial-integrity20210601204213>.

⁵² Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 'XIII BRICS Summit—New Delhi Declaration', 9 Sept. 2021, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34236/XIII_BRICS_Summit_New_Delhi_Declaration.

⁵³ Rajiv Bhatia, 'In 2022, India should keep an eye on Indo-Pacific', *Indian Express*, 15 Jan. 2022, <https://indian-express.com/article/opinion/columns/in-2022-india-should-keep-an-eye-on-indo-pacific-7723793>.

⁵⁴ Rezaul H. Laskar and Sutirtho Patranobis, "'Our relationship isn't normal": Jaishankar's blunt message to China's Wang Yi', *Hindustan Times*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/our-relationship-isn-t-normal-jaishankar-s-blunt-message-to-china-s-wang-yi-101648225886157.html>.

⁵⁵ 'China is building infrastructure along Arunachal border, says Indian Army', *Scroll*, 17 May 2022, <https://scroll.in/latest/1024090/china-is-building-infrastructure-along-arunachal-border-says-indian-army>.

⁵⁶ Yeshi Seli, 'Jaishankar reaffirms respect for territorial integrity in BRICS FM meet', *New Indian Express*,

Soon after came speculation that India might block China's plan to expand the BRICS, which was due to be unveiled by President Xi at the leaders' summit.⁵⁷ The media were briefed that New Delhi opposed this proposal because Beijing was intent on transforming the forum into an anti-western alternative to the G7.⁵⁸ This disagreement came to a head at the summit in late June 2022, which was eventually held online, albeit with Modi in attendance.⁵⁹ In his opening remarks, the Indian prime minister made pointed criticisms of China, insisting not just that member states respect each other's 'security concern[s]' but that they also desist from politicizing the international designation of terrorists—a reference to Beijing's obstruction of India's efforts to proscribe Pakistan-based terrorists at the UN.⁶⁰ India then successfully delayed BRICS expansion, agreeing only to more discussion of the issue.⁶¹ And pointedly, Modi departed for Germany to attend a G7 summit immediately after the meeting.⁶²

This episode prompted some Indian observers to suggest that the BRICS might 'break up'.⁶³ In the event, it expanded, but only after China had relinquished the chair. In Johannesburg, South Africa, in August 2023, at the first in-person summit for four years, the partners agreed to admit Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).⁶⁴ Both Brazil and India were reportedly reluctant to consent but eventually relented, with some analysts arguing that New Delhi changed its stance because it had good relations with at least half the new members.⁶⁵ Others argued that India could afford to make the concession, as it was part of several other groupings that might become more strategically significant.⁶⁶ It is also likely that New Delhi was wary of undermining its relationships with other longstanding BRICS members.⁶⁷

20 May 2022, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2022/May/20/external-affairs-minister-dr-s-jais-hankar-while-highlighting-the-key-points-during-the-brics-forei-2455806.html>.

⁵⁷ Rezaul H. Laskar, 'India cautious on Brics expansion', *Hindustan Times*, 30 June 2022, <https://www.hindustan-times.com/india-news/india-cautious-on-brics-expansion-101656526682146.html>.

⁵⁸ Sudhi Ranjan Sen, 'India to resist anti-US messaging at BRICS summit with Xi, Putin', *Bloomberg*, 21 June 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-21/india-to-resist-anti-us-messaging-at-brics-summit-with-xi-putin>.

⁵⁹ Shubhajit Roy, 'China proposes visits, events to revive India talks', *Indian Express*, 17 March 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-china-border-talks-modi-xi-brics-meet-line-of-actual-control-ladakh-7823284>.

⁶⁰ 'At BRICS summit, Modi says that designating terrorists should not be "politicised"', *The Wire*, 25 June 2022, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/brics-summit-modi-designating-terrorists-politicised>.

⁶¹ 'XIV BRICS summit Beijing declaration', 23 June 2022, http://brics2022.mfa.gov.cn/eng/hywj/ODS/202207/t20220705_10715631.html, para. 73.

⁶² Shreya Upadhyay, 'BRICS, Quad, and India's multi-alignment strategy', *Stimson Center*, 12 July 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/brics-quad-and-indias-multi-alignment-strategy>.

⁶³ Shashi Tharoor, 'Are the BRICS breaking up?', *Project Syndicate*, 7 July 2022, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/brics-strategic-direction-enlargement-indian-unease-by-shashi-tharoor-2022-07>.

⁶⁴ 'XV BRICS Summit Johannesburg II Declaration', *BRICS Information Centre*, 23 Aug. 2023, <http://www.brics.utoronto.ca/docs/230823-declaration.html>. In late December 2023, the newly elected Argentine president, Javier Milei, announced the country would not join.

⁶⁵ Ankit Tiwari, 'India's hesitation as China pushes for BRICS expansion', *The Interpreter*, 22 Aug. 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-s-hesitation-china-pushes-brics-expansion>. See also Daniel Markey, quoted in Heather Ashby et al., 'What BRICS expansion means for the bloc's founding members', *United States Institute for Peace*, 30 Aug. 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/what-brics-expansion-means-blocs-founding-members>.

⁶⁶ C. Raja Mohan, 'Move over SCO and BRICS—swing states are set to take precedence', *Indian Express*, 5 July 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/move-sco-brics-swing-states-precedence-8743827>.

⁶⁷ Abhinandan Kumar, 'Walking a tightrope: assessing India's engagements with G20 and BRICS', *India Quar-*

Within the BRICS, then, we can again see evidence of India using a multilateral or minilateral forum to soft balance China. But here New Delhi employed different tactics to those it used in the RIC. In 2020 and 2021 it continued to engage with the BRICS, maintaining a line of communication to Beijing as well as good relations with other members, and allowing it to advance its own agenda while chair. But in 2022, once China took the lead, India shifted to soft balancing, delaying BRICS expansion to prevent Beijing from scoring a diplomatic victory, as well as signalling India's unhappiness about China's plan to forge an anti-western economic bloc.⁶⁸

Trivializing the SCO

In the SCO, India's behaviour was even more varied during and after the Galwan crisis. It must be noted, too, that New Delhi had earlier used the forum to soft balance China; indeed, India began to do this almost as soon as it became an official member in mid-2017. But in 2022, as we shall see, India shifted more decisively into a new phase of soft balancing in the SCO, best characterized as trivialization.

The SCO was founded in 2001 as a successor organization to the 'Shanghai Five' grouping of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. India and Pakistan were offered membership in 2015, pending admission in 2017. During the intervening two years, however, India's relations with China deteriorated⁶⁹ as Beijing pushed ahead with the BRI, first unveiled in 2013 and, especially, with the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, announced in 2015.⁷⁰ New Delhi had earlier been concerned that the BRI might boost China's economic power and diplomatic influence across Eurasia, but the CPEC added new difficulties because it promised substantial assistance to Pakistan and it involved infrastructure schemes in Kashmir, over which India claims sovereignty.⁷¹

For these reasons, once India joined the SCO it began to soft balance China, using the platform to issue thinly disguised criticisms of the BRI and opting out of joint statements endorsing the initiative.⁷² At every SCO meeting between 2017 and 2020, Modi or another Indian representative reiterated concerns about the

terly 79: 4, 2023, pp. 525–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284231203323>.

⁶⁸ Sudhi Ranjan Sen, 'Brics must avoid being an anti-West group as it grows, says PM Modi', *Business Standard*, 24 Oct. 2024, https://www.business-standard.com/external-affairs-defence-security/news/brics-must-avoid-being-an-anti-west-group-as-it-grows-says-pm-modi-124102400534_1.html.

⁶⁹ Kanti Bajpai, 'Narendra Modi's Pakistan and China policy: assertive bilateral diplomacy, active coalition diplomacy', *International Affairs* 93: 1, 2017, pp. 69–91, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iw003>.

⁷⁰ On the BRI, see Peter Ferdinand, 'Westward ho—the China dream and “one belt, one road”: Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping', *International Affairs* 92: 4, 2016, pp. 941–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12660>. On the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, see Katharine Houreld, 'China and Pakistan launch economic corridor plan worth \$46 billion', Reuters, 20 April 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN-oNA12T>.

⁷¹ Harsh V. Pant and Ritika Passi, 'India's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative: a policy in motion', *Asia Policy*, no. 24, 2017, pp. 88–95 at p. 89, <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2017.0025>.

⁷² Just prior to its accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, India also issued a stinging public critique of the BRI. See Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 'Official spokesperson's response to a query on participation of India in OBOR/BRI forum', 13 May 2017, <https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/28463>.

BRI.⁷³ Beginning at the foreign ministers' meeting in China in April 2018, New Delhi also dissented from the inclusion of language praising the BRI in joint communiqués.⁷⁴ At the Qingdao SCO leaders' summit in June 2018—which took place just days after Modi gave a landmark speech on India's Indo-Pacific strategy and support for the regional 'rules-based order'⁷⁵—the prime minister went a step further, outlining an alternative agenda to the one favoured by China. Dubbed 'SECURE'—for 'Security, Economic Development, Connectivity, Unity, Respect, and the Environment'—this scheme was clearly framed as an alternative to Xi's BRI-centric 'Community of Common Destiny'.⁷⁶

Yet in parallel New Delhi also used the SCO to engage Beijing and press the Chinese government to recognize India's interests and concerns about the LAC and other issues. This approach persisted into 2020 and for some time after the Galwan clash. The SCO Heads of State meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan, in early July provided an opportunity for India's minister of external affairs to speak with his Chinese counterpart on that issue.⁷⁷ The foreign ministers' meeting on 10 September then led to an agreement on a five-point plan to de-escalate the situation on the LAC.⁷⁸ In the event the deal did not hold, as tensions and skirmishes continued into 2021, but it allowed Modi to attend a virtual SCO leaders' summit hosted by Russia on 10 November.⁷⁹

In 2021, however, New Delhi's approach changed. Efforts at engagement were wound down and soft balancing stepped up. The ongoing military confrontation on the LAC led to a public disagreement at the SCO foreign ministers' meeting on 14 July. Apparently frustrated by China's non-compliance with the disengagement principles agreed in September 2020, India released a statement suggesting Jaishankar had given his Chinese counterpart a dressing-down, emphasizing 'the need to follow through' on their earlier deal and telling him that the delay was

⁷³ See, for example, Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, 'PM's remarks at Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit 2020', 10 Nov. 2020, https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-remarks-at-shanghai-cooperation-organisation-sco-summit-2020.

⁷⁴ Saibal Dasgupta, 'India only SCO member to oppose China's BRI', *Times of India*, 10 June 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-stays-out-of-move-to-support-chinas-bri-at-sco-meet/article-show/64533390.cms>.

⁷⁵ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 'Prime Minister's keynote address at Shangri La Dialogue (June 01, 2018)', 1 June 2018, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Minister+s+Keynote+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>. On the significance of the speech, see Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, 'Modi's vision for the Indo-Pacific region', International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2 June 2018, <https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2018/06/modi-vision-indo-pacific>.

⁷⁶ Narendra Modi via YouTube, 'PM Modi's remarks in the plenary session at SCO summit 2018 in Qingdao, China' [from 7:15 min to 7:50 min, in Hindi], 10 June 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUGANADnCh8>. On the broader context, see Arzan Tarapore, 'Using uncertainty as leverage: India's security cooperation with China', *War on the Rocks*, 18 June 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/using-uncertainty-as-leverage-indias-security-competition-with-china>.

⁷⁷ ANI, 'EAM Jaishankar meets Chinese counterpart Wang Yi on sidelines of SCO meeting in Astana', *Economic Times*, 4 July 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/eam-jaishankar-meets-chinese-counterpart-wang-yi-on-sidelines-of-sco-meeting-in-astana/articleshow/111475246.cms>.

⁷⁸ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 'Joint press statement—meeting of external affairs minister and the foreign minister of China (September 10, 2020)', 10 Sept. 2020, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32962>.

⁷⁹ Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, 'PM's remarks at Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit 2020'.

'visibly impacting the relationship in a negative manner'.⁸⁰ The fall of Kabul to the Taliban on 15 August 2021 overshadowed the remaining SCO meetings for the year but created new areas of disagreement between India and China, and indeed Russia. At the hybrid Heads of State summit in September and the virtual Heads of Government discussion in November, Modi and Jaishankar warned of the dangers of radical Islamism and against any plans SCO members might have to work with the Taliban. These remarks challenged calls from both Putin and Xi to release Afghan assets from overseas banks and engage the new regime.⁸¹

Further soft balancing occurred in 2022, leading up to India's assumption of its chair in 2023. First, New Delhi bypassed the SCO, convening a new India–Central Asia summit in January 2022 to further its trade and connectivity agendas in the region.⁸² This move signalled New Delhi's willingness to pursue these interests without heed to Chinese or indeed Pakistani concerns, outside the organization.⁸³ Second, Modi attended the Samarkand summit in September 2022, but neither shook the Chinese President's hand nor met him for a bilateral conversation. Moreover, Modi's public remarks at the meeting focused almost exclusively on economic issues, including supply chains, start-ups and traditional medicine, and an appeal for renewed attention to millet grains, setting aside the traditional security concerns of the organization.⁸⁴ Third, at the online Heads of Government meeting hosted by Chinese premier Li Keqiang in November, Jaishankar intensified India's criticism of China's BRI, calling for connectivity projects that were in the interests of central Asian states rather than others.⁸⁵ Together with India's promotion of the 'Lifestyle for the Environment' (LiFE) agenda, these actions prefigured India's work to challenge China and to trivialize the SCO when it took over the chair.⁸⁶

That trivialization entailed diverting the SCO agenda away from the geopolitical and security concerns Beijing promoted within the organization. It began in 2022 with New Delhi's proposal to create new working groups on start-ups and traditional medicine and carried on during the following year. To that end, India held a series of film festivals and events—including food fairs to promote different millets—and people-to-people exchanges, inside and outside the city of Varanasi, designated the SCO's first 'cultural and tourism capital'. In 2023, as SCO chair,

⁸⁰ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 'External affairs minister's meeting with State Councilor and foreign minister of China, H. E. Mr. Wang Yi on the sidelines of SCO foreign ministers' meeting', 14 July 2021, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/34016>.

⁸¹ M. K. Bhadrakumar, 'US, India prepare to play spoiler in Afghanistan', *Asia Times*, 20 Sept. 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/09/us-india-prepare-to-play-spoiler-in-afghanistan>. Bhadrakumar is a former diplomat.

⁸² 'Delhi Declaration of the 1st India–Central Asia Summit', Ministry of External Affairs, 27 Jan. 2022, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34773>.

⁸³ Claudia Chia and Zheng Haiqi, *The first India–Central Asia summit*, ISAS Insights (Singapore: National University of Singapore Institute of South Asian Studies, 2022), <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/the-first-india-central-asia-summit>.

⁸⁴ Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, 'PM's remarks at the SCO summit', 16 Sept. 2022, https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-remarks-at-the-sco-summit.

⁸⁵ Suhasini Haidar, 'At SCO meet hosted by China, Jaishankar takes aim at Belt and Road Initiative', *The Hindu*, 2 Nov. 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/at-sco-meet-hosted-by-china-jaishankar-takes-aim-at-belt-and-road-initiative/article66082149.ece>.

⁸⁶ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, '21st meeting of SCO council of heads of government', 1 Nov. 2022, <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/35847>.

India extended this approach by proposing a New Delhi Declaration that focused on millets, sustainable lifestyles and digital transformation. Only one security issue—deradicalization—was highlighted.⁸⁷ And to trivialize the organization still further, New Delhi then held the SCO leaders' summit online, despite the abatement of the pandemic.⁸⁸ This expedient meant that Modi avoided awkward encounters with both Xi and Putin. It also signalled how high the SCO sat on India's list of priorities, following prime-ministerial visits to Japan, Australia and the US earlier in the year for in-person meetings.⁸⁹

Modi's talking points for the summit—start-ups, traditional medicine, youth empowerment, digital inclusion and Buddhist heritage—contrasted sharply with China's preferred concerns.⁹⁰ At the foreign ministers' meeting earlier in 2023, China's erstwhile top diplomat Qin Gang had put forward five quite different issues for discussion: safeguarding strategic autonomy and opposing 'colour revolutions'; deepening security cooperation, including a 'crackdown' on 'terrorism, extremism and separatism'; promoting 'interconnected development'; supporting Xi's various signature projects, including the Global Security Initiative; and enhancing 'mechanism-building with a long-term view', including expanding the SCO.⁹¹ These were echoed in Xi's address to the leaders' summit, entitled 'Staying true to our founding mission and advancing unity and coordination to realize greater development'.⁹² But they had little in common with India's agenda.

Excluding with IBSA

In 2023 India also chaired the G20 and continued its soft balancing of China. But rather than denying meetings, delaying decisions or trivializing agendas, New Delhi took a different approach. This likely reflected a desire to ensure that the G20 was a success and to mitigate the risk of embarrassment if New Delhi pushed too hard on China—and China pushed back.⁹³ For these reasons, India soft balanced on the sidelines rather than within the forum itself, reviving the IBSA grouping to

⁸⁷ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 'Opening remarks by external affairs minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the SCO Council of Foreign Ministers', 5 May 2023, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/36532>.

⁸⁸ Rezaul H. Laskar, 'In surprise move, India decides to host SCO summit in virtual format on July 4', *Hindustan Times*, 30 May 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-to-host-sco-summit-virtually-on-july-4-chaired-by-pm-modi-theme-towards-a-secure-sco-with-10-pillars-of-cooperation-101685458616444.html>.

⁸⁹ Modi attended a Quad summit on 20 May 2023; he made an official visit to Australia on 22–24 May and a state visit to the US on 20–23 June.

⁹⁰ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, 'English translation of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's remarks at the 23rd SCO summit', 4 July 2023, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/36750>.

⁹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Qin Gang attends the SCO foreign ministers' meeting', 5 May 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjw/zzjg_663340/yzs_663350/xwlb_663352/202305/t20230506_11071465.html.

⁹² State Council of the People's Republic of China, 'Full text of Xi's address at SCO summit', 4 July 2023, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/202307/04/content_WS64a42528c6d0868f4e8dd7d3.html.

⁹³ Andrew F. Cooper, 'Between rewards and risks: India as host of the 2023 G20 summit', *India Quarterly* 79: 4, 2023, pp. 476–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284231203307>.

advance a new initiative without China and to implicitly criticize Beijing's BRICS agenda. In this way, India soft balanced primarily by exclusion. This approach was not, however, wholly successful. Throughout 2023 China obstructed India's efforts to advance its wider G20 agenda. Moreover, Xi Jinping chose not to attend the New Delhi G20 summit, which was perceived as a snub to Modi and to India.⁹⁴

India's use of IBSA came after a long period of neglect. The grouping—officially the IBSA Dialogue Forum—is one of the oldest multilaterals, dating back to 2003. It was created to advance UN reform, coordination on peace and security, and 'people-centric' development. From the start, it was also intended for soft balancing. In the early 2000s, the three members were all keen to find ways to manage western interventionism and to offset the West's power in global economic governance.⁹⁵ Yet despite these common concerns and an agreement in 2006 to hold regular summits, IBSA was soon displaced, like the RIC forum, by the BRICS.⁹⁶

In 2021, however, India began to revive IBSA. New Delhi floated the idea of a leaders' summit—which could not be organized, because of the pandemic—and proposed a national security advisers' meeting which did take place, albeit online.⁹⁷ The primary focus of that discussion was terrorism, but cybersecurity, intelligence-sharing and maritime security were also on the agenda, and Brazil and South Africa were invited to send ships to India's MILAN naval exercise in 2022.⁹⁸ The IBSA foreign ministers then met at the UN, and afterwards Jaishankar proposed a leaders' meeting on the sidelines of the Bali G20 summit later that year. Observing that India, Brazil and South Africa were scheduled to assume the G20 presidency in 2023, 2024 and 2025, respectively, he suggested they develop a shared agenda.⁹⁹ That leaders' meeting was not convened, however, as the outgoing Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro did not attend the Bali summit.¹⁰⁰

India pressed on the following year, amid broader efforts to re-engage the global South. In March 2023 G20 foreign ministers met in New Delhi, a separate discussion between IBSA foreign ministers was held, and journalists were briefed that

⁹⁴ David Pierson and Sameer Yasir, 'China's leader looks set to skip G20 summit in snub to India', *New York Times*, 4 Sept. 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/04/world/asia/china-g20-xi-snub.html>.

⁹⁵ Daniel Flemes, *Emerging middle powers' soft balancing strategy: state and perspectives of the IBSA Dialogue Forum*, GIGA Working Paper 57 (Hamburg: German Institute of Global and Area Studies, 2007), https://edoc.vifapol.de/opus/volltexte/2009/1617/pdf/wp57_flemes.pdf, pp. 13–16.

⁹⁶ Summits were held in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010 and 2011. The scheduled 2013 meeting in India was cancelled. Only one summit—in South Africa—followed, in 2017. See also Oliver Stuenkel, *The uncertain future of IBSA* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015).

⁹⁷ Pradeep S. Mehta and Aratrika Deb, 'India-led G20 and the ensuing troika: a test of time in the global South', *Economic Times*, 12 March 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-led-g20-and-the-ensuing-troika-a-test-of-time-in-the-global-south/articleshow/98577432.cms>.

⁹⁸ Press Trust of India, 'India, Brazil and South Africa NSAs slam cross-border terrorism', *Hindustan Times*, 25 Aug. 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-brazil-and-south-africa-nas-slam-cross-border-terrorism-101629906966047.html>. Brazil and South Africa did participate in MILAN 2022.

⁹⁹ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 'India–Brazil–S Africa to host next summit on Bali G20 sidelines', *Economic Times*, 22 Sept. 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-brazil-s-africa-to-host-next-summit-on-bali-g20-sidelines/articleshow/94364908.cms>.

¹⁰⁰ Bruno Meyerfeld, 'A downtrodden Bolsonaro ponders his next moves from Florida', *Le Monde*, 2 March 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/03/02/a-downtrodden-bolsonaro-ponders-his-next-moves-in-florida_6017885_4.html.

the forum would be revitalized.¹⁰¹ Then, at the G20 summit in early September, Modi convened a meeting with Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. The three, together with the United States, released a joint statement welcoming the G20's commitment to building 'better, bigger, and more effective multilateral development banks'.¹⁰² And shortly afterwards, at the UN, Jaishankar again met his IBSA counterparts and issued 'a fresh call for reformed multilateralism' as well as a commitment to 'invest new energy and add more substance' to the grouping.¹⁰³ A carefully worded communiqué committed the three 'large pluralistic, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic democracies' to advancing the interests of the global South.¹⁰⁴

This statement was significant. It signalled that the global South had powerful champions beyond China, and that India was prepared to work with Brazil and South Africa to advance their interests without Chinese involvement. This message was reinforced by a subtle change in the preferred language used by the grouping. Before 2023, IBSA joint statements referred to their countries as 'large pluralistic, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies', not as 'democracies', as they were described in the new joint communiqué.¹⁰⁵ It was clear too in their insistence that the G20 was the preferred place—the 'premier forum'—for global economic cooperation, rather than the BRICS.¹⁰⁶ And it was evident in their declared commitment to a 'rules-based, transparent, non-discriminatory, fair, equitable, open and inclusive multilateral trading system'.¹⁰⁷

In these ways, India's push to revive IBSA, enabled by the coincidence of G20 presidencies, was soft balancing by exclusion—singling out China from the wider group of 'rising powers' and pushing ahead without it. It likely reflected the view that the 'trilateral's rejuvenation' was necessary to 'introduce a better and more workable balance within BRICS as well as the G20' and offset 'China's growing assertiveness and practical domination' of those groupings.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ Shashank Mattoo, 'Members keen to revitalize India–Brazil–SA forum', *Mint*, 17 April 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/india-brazil-and-south-africa-to-revive-dormant-ibsa-forum-increase-diplomatic-focus-ibsa-diplomacy-brics-emerging-economies-11681753095941.html>.

¹⁰² Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, 'India–Brazil–South Africa–USA joint statement', 9 Sept. 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1955886>.

¹⁰³ Prashant Jha, 'In New York, IBSA commits to working together on global South issues', *Hindustan Times*, 24 Sept. 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/in-new-york-ibsa-commits-to-working-together-on-global-south-issues-101695493901800.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Government of Brazil, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'India–Brazil–South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue Forum 11th trilateral ministerial commission meeting—New York', 22 Sept. 2023, <https://www.gov.br/mre/en/contact-us/press-area/press-releases/india-brazil-south-africa-dialogue-forum-ibsa-11th-trilateral-ministerial-commission-meeting-new-york-22-september-2023>.

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, IBSA, 'Joint communiqué following the 10th IBSA trilateral ministerial commission meeting', 21 Sept. 2022, <https://www.ibsa-trilateral.org/pdf/Joint-Communique-following-the-10th-IBSA-Trilateral-Ministerial-Commission.pdf>. Note the references to 'participatory democracy', 'respect for human rights' and 'freedom'.

¹⁰⁶ Armaan Mathur, 'Why India must shape the new BRICS moment', *The Diplomat*, 2 June 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/06/why-india-must-shape-the-new-brics-moment>.

¹⁰⁷ Government of Brazil, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'India–Brazil–South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue Forum'.

¹⁰⁸ Rajiv Bhatia and Manjeet Kripalani, *Leveraging IBSA for the G20 troika presidencies*, Gateway House Paper 33, (Gateway House, 2023), <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/leveraging-ibsa-for-the-g20-troika-presidencies>, p. 16.

Conclusion

India's minilateral and multilateral soft balancing is only one part of the new China strategy developed after the Galwan clash. That strategy also involved internal and external hard balancing through the deployment of large forces close to the LAC, the acquisition of new weapons systems and boosts to the domestic defence industry, as well as closer military and defence industrial cooperation with partners like the United States and the imposition of economic sanctions in the form of restrictions on Chinese investment and the sale of Chinese software, as well as limits on direct flights between the two countries and the issuing of visas. Finally, it involved a new diplomatic posture, which set aside a long-established understanding about the management of the border dispute and other aspects of the bilateral relationship.¹⁰⁹

Employing soft balancing in this context and in combination with other measures intended to diminish China's relative power was rational, as soft balancing theorists see it. India was and remains the weaker party, operating in conditions of geopolitical uncertainty, unlikely to prevail in a full-scale war and locked into an economically interdependent relationship that would be very costly to disrupt. Its options during and after the Galwan crisis were, and remain, limited. In such circumstances, soft balancing is a relatively low-cost and relatively low-risk way to try to limit an adversary's relative power and to signal unhappiness with their behaviour. But it is not wholly without potential costs, as India's actions indicate. New Delhi's selection of different tactics in different forums suggests that it is highly attuned to the potential dangers associated with attempts to constrain a target state by soft balancing, in terms of diminishing the likelihood of future cooperation, provoking punishment or alienating third parties.¹¹⁰

The use of different tactics in different contexts suggests that states make careful choices about how to soft balance—that is, about which tactics to employ—and that these choices depend to a significant degree on how useful or important they perceive a multilateral or minilateral grouping and their members to be. For example, India's use of denial—arguably the hardest-edged tactic of the four—indicates that the Modi government did not value the RIC highly even prior to Russia's attack on Ukraine. Its refusal to engage in anything more than an informal foreign ministers' meeting during the rest of 2022 and 2023 likely demonstrates that New Delhi valued the forum even less after the invasion, either in itself or as an instrument for soft balancing.¹¹¹ Similarly, New Delhi's trivialization of the SCO agenda in 2023 points to a low estimation of its value to India, but a higher estimation of its usefulness for frustrating Beijing's Eurasian ambitions.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Tanvi Madan, 'China has lost India: how Beijing's aggression pushed New Delhi to the West', *Foreign Affairs*, 4 Oct. 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/china-has-lost-india>.

¹¹⁰ See also Rajagopalan, 'Evasive balancing'.

¹¹¹ Anand P. Krishnan and Jabin T. Jacob, 'A view from India', *The Asan Forum*, 23 Oct. 2023, <https://theasanforum.org/a-view-from-india-2>.

¹¹² Chilamkuri Raja Mohan, *India and the SCO: all is not well*, ISAS Briefs (Singapore: National University of Singapore Institute of South Asian Studies, 2023), <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/india-and-the-sco-all-is-not-well>.

By contrast, New Delhi's more cautious soft balancing of China in the BRICS and the G20 indicates that it values these groupings and their members considerably more highly. India's delaying of BRICS expansion was probably the softest piece of soft balancing used after the Galwan clash. It suggests that India still sees the BRICS as a useful forum and that it wishes to remain on good terms with other members, both old (like Brazil and South Africa) and new (like Saudi Arabia and the UAE).¹¹³ In parallel, New Delhi's resurrection of the IBSA, excluding China from one set of discussions without compromising the wider agenda of the G20, confirms what many others have observed, namely that the Modi government greatly valued the opportunity to chair the latter.¹¹⁴

Gauging the possible effects of these actions—as opposed to their likely motivations—is much more difficult. India's soft balancing in the RIC, BRICS and SCO arguably deprived China of a series of propaganda victories after Galwan, undercutting Beijing's arguments that Sino-Indian relations had quickly rebounded or returned to normal after the confrontations on the LAC. It may also have pressured Beijing to return to the negotiating table and given India additional leverage. Certainly, in late October 2024 Beijing and New Delhi signed a deal to disengage their forces in contested areas of the union territory of Ladakh (where the Galwan Valley is located) and to restore to India patrolling rights lost four years earlier. But whether China signed up to this agreement because India successfully undermined its power in any specific unilateral or multilateral, or in all of them, is hard to determine. Beijing could equally have been moved to act by India's ongoing hard balancing on the LAC or New Delhi's economic sanctions on Chinese trade, investment, flights and visas—or indeed by exogenous factors such as anticipated changes to US foreign policy, as some analysts have suggested.¹¹⁵ Settling this issue requires insight into Beijing's strategic calculus beyond the scope of this article.

Having struck a deal on de-escalation on the LAC, India may now wind back its soft balancing, should New Delhi assess that more cooperative tactics might assist with the further stabilization of the bilateral relationship. But it seems unlikely that New Delhi will abandon it altogether, since it presently lacks the means to hard balance China and since the situation on the Sino-Indian frontier remains fraught, with large forces still deployed by both sides and mistrust evident in both capitals. Soft balancing, together with economic sanctions, are likely to remain preferred instruments for challenging Beijing's power and influence and signalling New Delhi's ongoing dissatisfaction with Chinese behaviour.

¹¹³ Jagannath Panda, 'India's BRICS balancing act', United States Institute of Peace, 17 Oct. 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/10/indias-brics-balancing-act>.

¹¹⁴ See, for example, Cooper, 'Between rewards and risks'.

¹¹⁵ Kanti Bajpai, 'Why have China and India suddenly come together?', *Foreign Policy*, 20 Nov. 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/11/20/china-india-border-detente-trump>.