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High noon in the Himalayas

Examining the escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict
during the summer of 2020

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Abstract

This master's thesis examines the escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict in the summer of 2020. Using a modified version of Graham Allison's multi-lens model, variants of realism, institutionalism and constructivism are applied to the case in order to find explanatory factors. The different theoretical schools also serve to clearly delineate what assumptions the identified aspects are based on and why they are important. The study finds that a broad range of factors can be identified as playing a role in the escalation. Longer term ones such as the increased assertiveness of Chinese foreign policy, the slow but steady Indian pivot towards the United States and the changing views of the Indian public coincided with short term factors like the Covid-19 pandemic, the internal pressures on the PLA and the proclamation of the Ladakh Union Territory. It also shows that some factors were stabilizing forces preventing even further escalation, such as the language games in place and the consultations and agreements in existence. This study can help shed light on other Chinese actions, the relationship between China and India, and in extension future prospects on the Sino-Indian border.

Keywords: China, India, Border conflict, Galwan, escalation

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1. Introduction

These last few years, China's foreign policy has been getting a lot of notoriety. As shown by Silver, Devlin and Huang, in Western countries especially, the popular image of the Chinese state has turned negative, owing to actions in Hong Kong, aggression in the South China Sea and towards Taiwan, and a generally antagonistic stance towards the west (Silver, Devlin & Huang, 2019). What many do not know however, is that one of the oldest conflicts in which China is engaged takes place high up in the Himalayan mountains, with India. In 2016, Ling et al laid out the story of the conflict in the study "India China: Rethinking Borders and Security", from the origins in the Sino-Indian war of 1962, to how the two states have had continuing disputes over the exact location of their border, including deaths and a large number of injured or frost-bitten soldiers (Ling et al, 2016). My study will provide a more focused perspective on the escalation in 2020, contributing both an up-to-date contribution to the literature on the specific conflict and adding to the broader literature on border conflicts.

The Sino-Indian conflict has gone partly under the radar in the west, but it is an incredibly important one, as it involves the two most populous countries on earth, both with massive economies. Their interactions have great impacts not only on the world economy, but also on greater geopolitical issues, especially since India is still nominally non-aligned. If the conflict makes India "choose a side", it has major implications for the global balance of power. This lingering border conflict lies at the heart of Sino-Indian relations, with great implications for the state of international relations in Asia and the world. Understanding it better thus provides crucial information for policymakers trying to navigate international politics. The escalation of the conflict in the summer of 2020 represented an extreme in modern times, in that a significant number of soldiers died, bringing the conflict closer to open hostilities than it had since 1962. By studying this event, we can learn about what causes lingering territorial conflicts to escalate, providing great academic value, and simultaneously finding explanations for the specific case, important for avoiding further escalation on the Sino-Indian border.

1.2 Abbreviations

LAC - Line of Actual Control

PLA - People's Liberation Army

Quad - The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

WTC - Western Theater Command

1.3 Puzzle

My thesis will center around one puzzling question. The conflict between China and India has persisted for more than 60 years, but there were no combat deaths reported between 1975 and 2020 (Green, 2020, p. 1). Suddenly, somewhere around 50 soldiers died during the clashes in the Galwan valley in June of 2020. Why was that the case? Negotiations were (and are still in 2023) taking place on a regular basis, just like they had been for many years, so on the face of it, the conflict had not changed drastically (Sharma, 2022). The long list of diplomatic initiatives and fairly normalized relations that exists between the two countries is another quite interesting aspect. These efforts have in one sense been quite successful, as deaths overall have been limited and no large-scale conflict has erupted since the war in 1962, but no long-term resolution has been reached either, eventually resulting in the escalation in question.

Studying the foreign policy decision making and the circumstances of this case will provide further insight and understanding of both the relationship between the two superpowers China and India, but also of Chinese assertiveness, and perhaps the escalation of conflicts in general (Patey, 2020 & Gibler, 2012). These potential lessons learned could have great public relevance, as well as contributing a little more attention to a conflict and a case that has often received very little attention in the rest of the world. I hope to contribute to the academic community studying escalations and the application of a multi-lensed model of analysis on a case. The fact that the conflict is still ongoing and that the major clashes are very recent also contributes to the relevance of the thesis, just like the Cold War was still ongoing when Graham Allison wrote "Essence of Decision" (Allison, 1971).

It is crucial for my understanding of this puzzle to know how the escalation started. If all evidence would point to this being a misunderstanding or an accident, the puzzle would have to be approached from that perspective, but if one side deliberately provoked it, that would invite an analysis of motivations. Most scholars and analysts do however point toward China being the aggressive side in this case, and my findings corroborate this (Green, 2020, Shinkman, 2020 & Dutt, 2020). It is thus highly interesting to study why they chose this course of action, and why they did it at that particular time. Even if I would have found that the opposite was true, that would be an interesting conclusion too. The study is not intended to point fingers or lay blame on one side or the other, but the question of who was responsible is a crucial aspect that will contribute towards the understanding of the big picture.

Progressing from this intriguing puzzle, I will answer the following research question:

“How can we understand the escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict in the summer of 2020?”

1.4 Background

In order to set the stage for my study, I will provide a brief background and overview of the conflict. Most historical background information is quite universally agreed upon, but it is important to consider the implications of using mostly Western and Indian sources, as I have done due to language barriers. It could affect the subsequent analysis, but in order to get a picture that both sides could agree on, I have collected information from a broad range of sources, including academic pieces and news articles. When there is disagreement, I comment on it.

The disputed area lies in the Himalayan mountain range, along the Sino-Indian border. Due to the existence of Nepal and Bhutan, the border is broken into three sectors, primarily a western and an eastern one, on the respective sides of Nepal. These regions are primarily barren mountains, with fairly limited populations and natural resources. The only significant resource is water, with many rivers originating from the high peaks. It should still be noted however, that many important regions lie close to the border, such as Kashmir and Ladakh for India and Tibet and Xinjiang for China, all representing internal challenges for the two nations as well (Kaura, 2020, p. 502).

After Indian independence from the British in 1947, the border with China was drawn according to old colonial-era treaties, which were not bilaterally agreed upon. Eventually, these lingering disagreements came to a head with the Sino-Indian war of 1962, where Chinese troops crossed the de-facto border both in the west and the east. That war ended with successful Chinese advances, and since then the border has been called the “Line of Actual Control” (LAC), reflecting the reality on the ground rather than the claimed areas that widely overlap (Kaura, 2020, p. 502). Ever since, the Indian side has been on the defensive, trying to avoid a similar pushback as in 1962. To preempt another pushback they have kept a continuous military presence in the border regions and have been building infrastructure to facilitate rapid deployment (The Diplomat, 2023). In 2017 a stand-off occurred at Doklam, at the tripoint of Bhutan, China and India, after the Chinese started to build a road into an area controlled by Bhutan (Kaura, 2020, p. 503). Violence erupted but was curtailed, and no deaths were reported.

Multiple deaths were however reported in 2020, at the Galwan valley in the western part of the border, close to Kashmir and Ladakh. Around the 15th and 16th of June, soldiers on both sides died after fierce melee clashes (Green, 2020, p. 3). As a confidence-building measure, firearms had not been carried by patrols at the LAC, but with tensions persisting shots were eventually fired on the 7th of September 2020, the first time since 1975 (Chubb, 2020).

Some general background on the relationship between China and India could also be helpful. As neighbors and fellow Asian powerhouses, they have ample economic exchanges, rising to a record USD 135.98 billion in 2022, despite political tensions (Economic Times, 2023). With Chinese exports dominant however, India is facing a significant deficit in this trade relationship, which the political leadership is very concerned about (Economic Times, 2023). Politically the two countries are slightly more distant. Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping have met many times since both came to power around 10 years ago, but after the 2020 clashes interactions have been more sparse, to a large part due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the clashes, the Indian government also implemented measures such as banning 55 Chinese mobile apps, including TikTok, WeChat and Weibo, with the expressed intention of safeguarding Indian interests (SCMP, 2023).

India's overarching foreign policy strategy has since independence been one of non-alignment, never choosing a side and always looking to the interests of India first and foremost, but with increased Chinese assertiveness, this is starting to change (Malhotra, 2022, p. 242). India has edged closer to the US, becoming active in the so-called Quad, a grouping of the US, India, Japan and Australia, as well as buying more American weapons and equipment (Tellis, 2021). At the same time however, New Delhi is still quite reliant on Russia, especially prior to the invasion of Ukraine. Most Indian arms imports had since the Cold War been from Russia, as its constant nemesis Pakistan was a US ally (Madan, 2020). India is still nominally non-aligned.

China did for a long while have a similar strategy to India, choosing to focus on internal matters rather than foreign interests. This changed however as their capabilities grew during the 2000's, and with Xi's rise to power China entered a new phase of very active foreign policy. Through economic measures such as the Belt and Road initiative and military provocations in the South China Sea and around Taiwan, China has shown that it holds strong ambitions to become a new superpower (Kaura, 2020, p. 510). Indian foreign policy has had to react to this, feeling hemmed in by increased Chinese activity in countries neighboring India. For example, Pakistan is one of the largest beneficiaries of the Belt and Road program, Myanmar sees major Chinese influence, and Sri Lanka has seen massive Chinese investments, and now, massive debts (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022).

This information provides crucial context and background for understanding the escalation of the border conflict in 2020, and many of these factors will reoccur and be expanded upon throughout the analysis.

1.5 Timeline

For the purpose of clarity, I will provide a brief timeline over the Sino-Indian border, zoomed in on the clashes in 2020, and a map of the border. (Green, 2020, p. 3 & Bommakanti, 2023)

1947: Indian independence from the United Kingdom

1962: The Sino-Indian war ends in a commonly agreed upon Chinese victory

1975: 4 Indian soldiers killed in skirmishes

2017: Doklam standoff over Chinese road construction, multiple injured

2020: 5th of May: Initial skirmishes occur over Indian road construction in the Galwan valley

10-11 May: 72 Indian soldiers reported injured in clash across the LAC

15 June: 20 Indian soldiers reported dead (an unknown number of Chinese soldiers likewise)

7 September: Shots fired by both sides

2021: Clashes with multiple injured in January

2022: Clashes with multiple injured in December

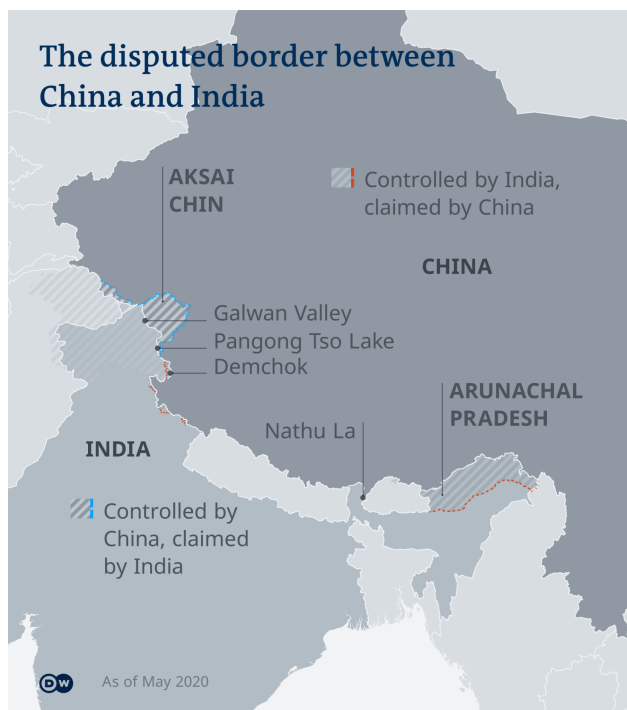


Fig. 1: Map showing the border with the disputed regions. The escalation of 2020 was centered around the Galwan valley, in the northwest. Doklam, where skirmishes took place in 2017, is close to the Nathu La pass (Sharma (Deutsche Welle), 2020).

2. Theory

In order to answer my research question, I will employ Graham Allison's model of multiple theoretical viewpoints, first used in his landmark study "The Essence of Decision" from 1971. In examining the Cuban missile crisis, Allison elected to conduct an analysis based on three different perspectives. His motivation for using the three perspectives was that such a watershed event in world history can not be explained simply by utilizing the rational actor-model that was dominant in political science at the time. Allison argued that "*an imaginative analyst can construct an account of value-maximizing choice for any action or set of actions performed by a government*" and thus, other perspectives were needed in order to get a complete picture (Allison, 1971, p. 35). To achieve this, he adopted three "lenses" of analysis, the abovementioned "Rational Actor" model, the "Organizational Process" model, and the "Bureaucratic/Governmental Politics" model. In doing this he achieved a broader and more holistic view of the decision-making process, while still keeping the parameters of decision-making fixed.

Allison chose to examine the Cuban Missile crisis to a large part because it was an extreme case, where the fate of the world hung on the precipice. Additionally, when he wrote the book nine years after the event in 1971, it had already accumulated quite a number of first hand-sources, which enabled him to do a deep-dive into the inner workings of the decision-making process, especially beneficial for his organizational model. Much had been said about the crisis even at the time, but Allison sought to illustrate new aspects by breaking it down lens by lens in order to get a more holistic perspective and more clearly show the differences between what can be derived from a case.

The three lenses are a central component of his model, and can be summarized thus: In the first model states are regarded as unitary actors, in the second model, organizations within the state have their own internal and rational logics too, and in the third model every individual is an actor in themselves and the end result of decision-making results from negotiation (Allison, 1971, p. 4-5). For his time, the latter two were relatively novel perspectives which illuminated that seeing states as unitary actors could be a flawed ontological assumption, as they were made up of different organizations and individuals with their own context and motivations.

For the purpose of my thesis, I have chosen to combine the "Organizational Process" and the "Bureaucratic/Governmental Politics" models into a single institutionalist model and add a constructivist lens (Allison, 1971, p. 4-5). In modern political science, constructivist aspects are very well established, and the contribution of analyzing social aspects of decision-making is greatly valued (Zehfuss, 2002, p. 1). In order to better understand the event I will thus examine these aspects as well by making my third lens based on constructivism. This way I will have three lenses with different theoretical perspectives that can still be coalesced into a deeper understanding of the escalation of the border conflict. I will now go over the theoretical baselines of my models.

2.1 The realist perspective

My rational actor model will represent a realist international relations perspective, focusing on interests and mainly based on John Mearsheimer's offensive realism (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 5). Basing my lenses on well established theoretical schools of thought will ensure a rigidity to the study that could otherwise be lacking when applying three different lenses. My analysis will also use different concepts from the realist school to help answer my research question, such as the concept of the security dilemma, balance of power and uncertainty in rational models (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 3, 31 & 35). These tools can help provide an answer to why the conflict escalated by connecting occurrences and patterns in my case to an established theoretical context.

Looking at the states as unitary actors can be a good way to analyze the state of the global system and the purely rational reasons for their decision-making, which is why the realist perspective has never completely fallen out of favor in the political science world, despite advances in other schools. Allison's model theoretically presupposes that the actors are not only perfectly rational but that they also have perfect information. In reality, this is very rarely the case, and it has been raised by other scholars as a weakness in the original model, since his aim partly is to challenge the presumptions inherent in the theories, and he fails to challenge this factor (Bendor & Hammond, 1992, p. 304). Thus, I will learn from this and include a consideration regarding uncertainty and the non-perfect information of actors in my analysis, as an improvement on the original model. Certainly, neither China nor India had perfect information regarding the other's intentions, and by keeping the effect that this has in mind, I can ensure a greater understanding of the case.

2.2 The institutionalist perspective

Allison's two other models focused on the mechanisms and inherent values of organizations, and individual political interests and the negotiating nature of bureaucracy respectively. He argues that some decisions cannot be explained by looking at perfectly rational and unitary states, and that you must break up the unit of the state into smaller parts. Both of his models share an institutionalist view that there are certain logics and constructions that make up the functions of institutions, such as a military force or a foreign ministry, and that these logics will affect the final result. In his case he takes Kennedy's political considerations or the ineffective coordination between the Soviet army and leadership as examples of this (Allison, 1971, p. 46, 95).

Since these two models share an institutionalist foundation, I have elected to combine the two into one single lens. I will keep most aspects of Allison's model, as it raises important elements of decision-making, but I will also combine it with newer theoretical perspectives that fit the institutionalist baselines, mainly utilizing rational institutionalism and historical institutionalism. The former can very plainly help understand motivations and sheds light on the diversity of actors involved that the state-centered realism misses, while keeping the universalist ontological assumption that rational actors act in a certain way. In my case it is clear that subsections within the state such as the military or the political leadership had an effect, both from my research and from previous study on border conflicts (Gibler, 2012, p. 2). Historical institutionalism on the other hand recognizes the "stickiness" of institutions, meaning the internal logics, values and routines that they have developed over time that shapes how they act and operate (Rixen & Viola, 2016, p. 10). This perspective brings important context to the analysis, and claims that every case is unique. The Indian and Chinese armies would in this case not be interchangeable, but shaped by their specific situation and historical developments. Compared to the rationalists, this perspective lacks predictive quality, but for the purposes of my study that is not a necessity, as my aim is to understand the escalations of 2020 through different theoretical lenses.

The difference between Allison's second and third lenses is that the organizational lens considers organizations as more or less unitary actors with their own logics, while the bureaucratic lens focuses on the individual actors that make up these organizations, and their negotiations. These are two distinct perspectives, and it is important to distinguish one from

the other. However, they do not contradict each other. The PLA can for example have a certain internal logic to its actions, while the general in charge at the same time tries to improve his standing within the leadership. Since the perspectives share the same theoretical grounds, a combined approach is doable.

2.3 The constructivist perspective

My constructivist lens will introduce a new aspect into Allison's classic structure not originally present. Adapting his structure is not a new invention, as it has been seen a lot of discussion and variants over the years, for example by Jonathan Bendor and Thomas Hammond in 1992, but my variant will through the inclusion of constructivism provide the thesis with a degree of theoretical innovation (Bendor & Hammond, 1992). The constructivist lens will be focused on the socially constructed elements of the conflict, which Allison's model lacked. All three of his lenses were based on rational decision-making, albeit on different levels of scale. It should be said however, that he certainly accounted for social aspects in his model, such as how actions would look politically, but he did not analyze it as a stand-alone perspective or with an ontological and epistemological framework (Allison, 1971, p. 163).

For my case, I find social aspects to be highly important, such as the general atmosphere during the Covid-19 pandemic, internal political pressures, and the relationship between India and China. There were lots of societal forces at play, and focusing just on the rational considerations of the principal actors could mean that other important factors are missed. In line with the other two lenses, this will also be based on a well established theoretical foundation, namely the concept of norms and rules, first developed by Nicholas Onuf and Friedrich Kratochwil (McCourt, 2022, p. 53-54). The social construction of power politics and the importance of language bears a lot of promise in my particular case, as statements, posturing and negotiations all were crucial factors during the escalation.

2.4 General theoretical considerations

I am modifying Allison's original model for two main reasons. One is that for my case, the second and third models would fill a fairly similar analytical function. In the case of the Cuban missile crisis, there is a clear distinction between John F. Kennedy acting on his

political and bureaucratic considerations while the branches of service for example were thinking more in terms of their own organizations. There were also ample primary sources from the individuals involved, which gave lots of internal material to be analyzed. In considering the Galwan clashes of 2020, there are much fewer primary sources available. My research question concerns how we can understand the escalation of the conflict, so without information from the decision-makers themselves, it is beneficial to instead base one section of the analysis on social aspects where sources are slightly more readily available. Evidently, it makes sense both practically and theoretically to include this lens.

The Chinese are certainly crucial actors in the study, as they are regarded by most independent actors as having initiated the clashes (Shinkman, 2020). In their case, the motivations of Xi Jinping and the PLA can still be seen as separate, but they were much closer entwined than those of Kennedy and the US Army were, due to China not being a democracy, which also means that Xi did not have to contend with a combative congress in the same way that Kennedy did (Bommakanti, 2023). On the other hand, the unipolarity of the Chinese leadership should not be overestimated. Xi is more powerful than a president in a democratic state, but there are still internal spaces for ambition and differing views to some extent, which means that the bureaucratic and bargaining aspect of Allison's theory is still relevant to the Chinese decision-making. This further motivates my methodological amendment of the model.

The second reason is that Allison's three models would be missing out on important aspects in my case. My research question concerns the escalation of the conflict, so there is a particular interest in understanding why this happened. The nature of the Cuban Missile crisis is quite different, as there was no actual fighting, and perhaps the main point of interest was the successful de-escalation. Since my case focuses on why there *was* an escalation, it is highly interesting to study what led to it. This can partly be achieved by employing Allison's first model, examining the rational and realist considerations, such as attaining a stronger position in negotiations or gaining territory, but other important aspects can be much more succinctly explained by utilizing constructivism and examining social factors.

In the article *Rethinking Allison's Model*, Jonathan Bendor and Thomas Hammond highlight a number of important aspects that display some weaknesses in Graham Allison's original models. They acknowledge the fact that he tries to do both a historically descriptive study and

a scientific political study at the same, inevitably losing out on some criteria for each (Bendor & Hammond, 1992, p. 318). They claim that in the theoretical and scientific aspects, the study lacks the depth that could be possible in the models, such as not considering hierarchy in the third model or barely mentioning the uncertainty of international politics in the first model. Furthermore, Bendor and Hammond call for more clearly defined parameters of the lenses used, as it is vital to prove one of Allison's overall points, that different lenses will provide different results and explanations (Bendor & Hammond, 1992, p. 319). From this follows that it must be very clear what the different lenses entail. I have tried to build on such past critiques and improvement upon Allison's model, taking into account the theoretical developments that have been achieved since *Essence of Decision* was first published.

2.5 Literature review

The escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict and the Galwan clashes occurred just three years ago, but has already been the subject of much analysis and debate. Prior to this in 2016, Ling et al. compiled the book *India China: Rethinking Borders and Security*, where they outlined the relationship between the countries and proposed conceptual models for the border situations (Ling et al., 2016). After the Doklam stand-off in 2017 and certainly after the clashes in 2020, many scholars, especially in the region, came to study the situation and the relationship. Vinay Kaura in his article *India's Relations with China from the Doklam Crisis to the Galwan Tragedy* considers the situation from the Indian perspective and concludes that a shift has begun within the Indian leadership into a more prepared stance (Kaura, 2020). Sagarika Dutt in *The Galwan valley clash: Another perspective* also focuses on the Indian response and the bilateral attempts to defuse and de-escalate the situation (Dutt, 2020).

More similar to my approach is Ashok Sharma's article in the Times of India titled *Galwan valley clash unmasks China's geopolitical intent and India's delusion with China* (Sharma, 2020). He contends that the Galwan clashes were intended as a message that India is not a match to China. Another interesting study is the research paper *Reasons and Reactions to the Galwan Clash* by Sriparna Pathak and Obja Borah Hazarika, which considers the reasons for the clash (Pathak & Hazarika, 2022). They conclude that a combination of factors such as infrastructure construction along the border, increased Chinese assertiveness in the region and India making Ladakh with its disputed territories a Union state in 2019, all contributed to the

Chinese decision to escalate and demonstrate their power. Tanvi Madan also considers motivations and consequences of the escalation in a briefing made for the “U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing” in September 2020 (Madan, 2020). Similarly to other analysts, she places the event in a broader context of Chinese aggression and domestic instability due to the pandemic. In an earlier brief for the same commission hearing, analyst Will Green argues that the growing relationship between India and the United States is a key factor for the escalation and that China wanted to discourage this development (Green, 2020, p. 1).

Since more Indian scholars and analysts write in English and since they have more academic freedom than China, most literature on the topic available to me must be seen as possibly biased towards India. Due to my inability to read Mandarin, I am also unable to consider the Chinese studies that do exist. This is an important consideration to make, especially since the case is recent and all facts are not readily available, so when analyzing the case I have tried to account for the somewhat lopsided distribution of sources. More tangibly, this means that I have always searched for as many sources as possible, and tried to do extensive evaluation of my sources in order to ensure impartiality (Esaiasson et al, 2012, p. 288). There are however some Chinese articles in English that can help illuminate other perspectives. In *Boundary Standoff and China-India Relations*, Liu Zongyi presents a very different picture from the other sources (Liu, 2020). He blames Indian expansionism for the escalation, and cites a speech by Indian Home Secretary Amit Shah, who stated that the disputed Aksai Chin region was part of the newly proclaimed Ladakh Union Territory, as an inciting factor. Liu Zongyi also brings up the increasingly friendly relations between India and the US.

One important study on territorial conflicts in general is Douglas Glibler’s “The Territorial Peace”, which argues that international territorial conflicts are heavily shaped by the domestic politics of states, a fact that my research strongly showed too (Gibler, 2012, p. 2). There has also been ample theoretical discussion regarding Graham Allison’s theories and methods. As previously mentioned, in *Rethinking Allison's Model*, Jonathan Bendor and Thomas Hammond deep-dive into the model that Allison first presented back in 1971, and highlight a number of areas that need clarification or improvement (Bendor & Hammond, 1992). Stephen Smith focused specifically on the debate around Allison’s bureaucratic politics model in his 1980 article *Allison and the Cuban Missile Crisis: A Review of the Bureaucratic Politics Model of Foreign Policy Decision-Making* (Smith, 1980). He argues

that there are many deficiencies in the original model, partly theoretically but mainly methodologically.

The general consensus of the existing literature on my topic is that factors such as the Indian relationship with the US, Chinese assertiveness, and the proclamation of the Ladakh Union Territory all contributed to the clashes in 2020. My study examines these factors and others, contributing to an enhanced picture of the event while also clarifying the theoretical underpinnings of each factor. In doing so, I expose the origins of the factors already established in the literature while simultaneously identifying new aspects that can help explain why the escalation occurred.

3. Method

3.1 Methodology

The methodology and operationalisation of a study should always be formed to answer the research question. The value of a good method is to make sure the analysis is scientific, replicable and structured (Bryman, 2015, p. 3). My research question for this thesis is the following: “*How can we understand the escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict in the summer of 2020?*” It is a single case that I want to examine, specifically the escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict. It is also a how-question, which means that I am looking for qualitative answers rather than quantitative (Bryman, 2015, p. 375). These are important parameters to recognize, as it will greatly shape how the analysis is conducted.

As in many other cases, my theory and my method are tied closely together. Graham Allison’s model for analysis of foreign policy decision making is just as much a method as it is a theory, and it is made even more so since I alter many of the theoretical aspects of the model. More specifically, I have modified the theoretical aspects of the model but kept the general methodological aspects. So what does this model entail methodologically? Well, it employs multiple lenses of analysis for a single case, with each lens being underpinned by different ontological and epistemological assumptions (Allison, 1971, p. 8). It is always important to be aware of these assumptions when conducting political science, and Allison’s model takes what can often be a weakness, i.e. choosing one particular set of assumptions and basing your analysis on that, into a strength, combining multiple perspectives to get a more complete picture. In *Essence of Decision*, Graham Allison also weighs the perspectives against each other in order to find out which can best explain the Cuban missile crisis, but it is debatable how well he lives up to that goal (Bendor & Hammond, 1992, p. 319). Crowning a “winning” perspective is not the goal of my study, but in using them to provide a more thorough understanding of my case I will also argue for their strengths and weaknesses.

Despite being a seminal work and having many strengths, the model is not perfect or without its flaws. Three perspectives, however broad, will lose out on some variants of ontological and epistemological assumptions, and it is inevitable that the researcher themselves will color the analysis. Due to the open structure of the model that tries to take into account many

differing views, the model lacks a solid way of falsification, which many scholars after its publication has pointed out as a weakness (Smith, 1980, Bendor & Hammond, 1992). Another scholar trying to replicate Allison's study on the Cuban missile crisis could very possibly reach a different conclusion, due to them having different conceptions of the lenses. This is part of why the model struggles to provide an answer to which lens offers the best explanation for the event in question, as it is not sufficiently delineated what they entail (Bendor & Hammond, 1992, p. 319). It is important to recognize however, that this does not disqualify the model, even in its original state. Political science is a broad field, and since the model does offer a method for greater understanding of foreign policy decision-making, it is certainly valuable. It is important to keep these limitations of the model in mind, not attempting to use it for finding irrefutable truths or the optimal theoretical school but rather for enhancing understanding of an event and illuminating the differences in perspectives.

Since these issues exist with the original model however, I have in my method and my version of the model tried to rectify some of them, to the extent that is possible. As mentioned before, I have tried to be more clear than Allison was, more distinctly stating what my lenses are based on and what they entail. This is in fact helped along by my decision to combine the original second and third lenses, as many scholars have argued that they are quite similar and not adequately set apart in *Essence of Decision* (Smith, 1980, p. 36).

3.2 Operationalisation

When it comes to the concrete operationalisation of my study, I had to consider how to most succinctly answer my research question. I settled on a case study design, concerning a single case in an intensive and comprehensive manner, which suits the objective of my study well, as I seek a detailed understanding of the event in question (Bryman, 2015, p. 60). To understand how and why the escalation happened, I chose to examine it through different perspectives in Allison's model, but I also need to know what to analyze in the first place. The explanatory factors are the central focus of the study, as the unit of analysis is the Sino-Indian border conflict, and we know what happened to it (Esaiasson et al, 2012, p. 92). Thus, we want to find the aspects that resulted in the transpired events. The factors that I will examine are guided by both their theoretical relevance and the availability of sources, which lends itself best to purposive sampling (Bryman, 2015, p. 418). I have sampled sources

relating to both China and India, since they both undoubtedly had a significant role in the process of escalation, albeit China perhaps more consciously.

Searching for motives will be an important part of the study, as I seek to understand the reasons for the escalation of the border conflict. The theoretical lenses can offer some models that will help in this pursuit, like looking at rational geopolitical considerations in the realist lens, and in doing so I will seek what methodology calls motive indicators (Esaiasson et al., 2015, p. 295). Primary sources would be great for finding motivations and deepening our understanding of the escalation, but that is very hard to find, as it is a recent and highly secretive event. I have been searching intently, but no orders, internal communications or memoirs of the actors involved are available to me, which means that a qualified theoretical hypothesis might be the closest I get to the truth of the matter. That is a weakness to my study, but it does not rob it of relevance, as a wide-ranging and thorough analysis can still give important and helpful insights, especially if the argumentation is systematic and it is clear how the conclusions were reached (Esaiasson et al., 2015, p. 301). Providing a well motivated and structured analysis of the case can still be of great value, despite the scarcity of primary sources.

The sources and material that I do however have at my disposal are speeches and statements from representatives of the respective nations, information about the individuals responsible, and articles, research and reflections by other scholars. I have searched for these sources in many different locations. Searching the web and databases for news articles have resulted in helpful material, and academic collections have provided access to relevant studies that I can draw from to further my understanding of the case. Speeches and statements have often been found on official web pages of the respective governments or Indian and Chinese embassies in third countries. Official Chinese spokespeople often make statements for the foreign press, and that was true during the crisis as well. For example, on the 17th of June, just one day after the deadly clashes, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian answered questions from the press regarding the incident which demonstrated China's official line on the issue (Office of the Chinese Chargé d'Affaires to Lithuania, 2020).

More general information can also contribute to set the stage or provide important context to my study, but the lack of primary sources is still a significant issue for my analysis, as it somewhat precludes confirming the conclusions reached by my deductive research with

strong proof (Bryman, 2015, p. 21). To compensate for this, I have formulated my research question to not focus on finding answers, but rather to increase understanding, choosing a methodology well suited to do just that (Bendor & Hammond, 1992, p. 301) Taken together, while not providing definitive explanations of the reasons for escalation, the width if not depth of my sources do through the use of my method answer how we can understand the escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict in the summer of 2020.

4. Analysis

4.1 Analytical considerations

The choice of factors for analysis is done by a combination of initial research, considerations of what would be seen as important by the theoretical schools in question and the availability of sources. The initial literature review showed what scholars and other actors generally consider as important factors. Drawing from that baseline, I have considered what the realist, institutionalist or constructivist schools would think of these factors. Originating from the basic ontological and epistemological assumptions, I have identified four factors for each of the three lenses that make theoretical sense as explanatory factors. This model was chosen due to the benefits of a rigid structure, allowing an organized analysis of the four most relevant factors. Choosing which aspects to focus on was an ongoing process throughout my research, resulting in the ones with the greatest explanatory properties for the case (Bryman, 2015, p. 410).

Many more factors could however be raised for each theory, so in order to ensure replicability and a scientific value to my study, I have also considered sources that strengthen these theoretical assumptions by concrete evidence. Graham Allison had the benefit of access to both an extensive library of published primary sources as well as direct conversation with many of the actors involved in the Cuban Missile crisis (Allison, 1971, p. viii). My sources are significantly more limited, but many of the theoretical arguments can still be reinforced with statements, statistics or other corroborating information. In conducting the analysis according to my chosen fashion, I will not be able to produce definitive answers, but I will be able to answer the question of how we can understand the escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict in the summer of 2020.

4.2 The realist perspective

I will begin my analysis of the case by applying a realist lens to the escalation, followed by subsequently applying an institutionalist and a constructivist lens. Placing realism first results in an initial analysis where the variables are quite solid, followed by institutionalism and constructivism situating the events of June 2020 in a broader context and zooming in and

breaking down the considerations of the actors themselves. Realism will help in understanding the larger forces that compelled China to act on the border. Four realist factors on different scales will be highlighted, derived from the previously mentioned selection processes based on prior literature, the available sources and theoretical validity:

1. The effects of the Corona pandemic
2. The deepening relationship between India and the US
3. Increased construction of infrastructure on the border by India
4. The proclamation of the Ladakh Union Territory by the Indian parliament

The pandemic and the US-India relationship can be regarded as macro-level factors, while the latter two would rather classify as micro-level factors. No matter the scale however, they are all ontologically concrete factors that cannot rationally be denied as taking place, indicative of realist thinking. Since realism is mainly concerned with tangible, material aspects and argues that actors are motivated by seeking power, I identified that the pandemic greatly changed the capabilities and the relative power of different states (Bevir, 2022, p. 34). I also saw that the balancing of India with other powerful states, such as the United States, was changing the global power balance, and the strengthening of local material capabilities on the border was changing the specific local power balance. Lastly, the reduced uncertainty regarding the Ladakh region can be regarded as a deliberate move to both solidify Indian power over the region and to increase their independence of action, foregoing Chinese wishes.

Other factors could naturally be raised in a realist lens as well, such as military hardware changing the power balance or Xi Jinping wanting to test the resolve of India, but the sources needed to make such arguments are not available to me, as sources are classified or simply do not exist. In order to explore how we can understand the escalation in the summer of 2020, I will study these four potential factors, and how a realist would motivate their importance. That is not to say that only a realist would find them important, or even that all realists would choose the same four factors. Each theoretical school is very diverse, so to maintain a clear red thread throughout my analysis I will base my realist lens broadly on John Mearsheimer's offensive realism (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 5).

4.2.1 The Covid-19 pandemic

Early rumblings of the Covid-19 pandemic had begun around the end of 2019, and by March 2020 the pandemic was major and global. This was hitting China hard, both internally and externally, as economic activity, global value chains and international travel was curtailed (Pathak & Hazarika, 2022, p. 94). Initially the virus was fairly effectively controlled in China, but the efforts to achieve this led to significant problems. These were mainly of an economic nature due to shut-ins and the disruption of production, but it also led to frustration and displeasure. All of these effects spread outside the country, and with China being the location of the initial outbreak, global opinion often turned hostile (Kaura, 2020, p. 509).

As previously mentioned, realist theory, and especially Mearsheimer, insist that politics is a struggle among states that always seek to maximize their power, and that this power derives from your capabilities, be they military, economic, or in other forms (Reichwein & Rösch, 2021, p. 9). A weakening of the Chinese economy due to the pandemic, illustrated by a drop from 6 percent growth in 2019 to just 2.2 percent in 2020 is a tangible example of a weakening of state power. This fact would in a realist perspective necessitate a pushback against its neighbors and competitors, for example India, in order to maintain Chinese power (World Bank, 2023). This pushback would aim to re-strengthen the state, and there is some evidence that the Chinese government was well aware that possibilities also arose with the pandemic. In Hong Kong, where massive protests had raged the previous year, the outbreak of the pandemic meant that the population was much more restricted, and it was during this time that a “national security law” was enacted, to further increase the control that the government in Beijing could impose over Hong Kong (Pathak & Hazarika, 2022, p. 93). This would most certainly have been met with much more opposition both in Hong Kong and abroad should the pandemic not have physically controlled the population. With the eyes of the world turned inwards and focused on their own states in the crisis at hand, a realist would not have a hard time imagining the Chinese government trying to strengthen their position vis-à-vis India at the border.

One could also see that an international system already anarchic in nature lost much of its faint vestiges of a regulating structure during this time (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 30). As previously mentioned, the pandemic resulted in unprecedented isolationism, further increasing the ever-present uncertainties regarding other states’ intentions. When you

consider the primary goal of a state to be survival, a situation like this might very well have led to a “lashing out” of sorts by China, feeling threatened by both the pandemic, domestic unrest, international animosity and Indian measures (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 31). Kenneth Waltz and more defensively minded theorists would have a harder time explaining this course of action, instead expecting some sort of balancing. For offensive realists however, it makes sense that offensive action was the preferred option, as states will be offensive when the opportunity exists, being always power-maximizing (Reichwein & Rösch, 2021, p. 9). China would thus see the pandemic as an opportunity to strengthen their position on the international stage.

4.2.2 The relationship between India and the United States

Despite the pandemic however, states were not entirely left to their own devices. Relationships between states can help strengthen their capabilities and relative situations, and India is no exception. Since independence India has been very deliberately non-aligned, taking a largely passive role in international relations for many years, but this started to change in 2014 with Narendra Modi's presidency (Liu, 2020, p. 244). A non-aligned India was very beneficial for Chinese power as it ensured that India did not combine with another state to eclipse China's dominant position. Given the power imbalance between the two states, with a stronger Chinese economy as well as military, no real threat was projected from the Himalayan region (Kaura, 2020, p. 510). This state of affairs coincided with a lull in border conflict too, where few clashes were reported between the late 1980s and 2013 (Green, 2020, p. 4). The new Modi administration however reshaped Indian foreign policy into a more proactive stance, including increasingly close relations with the United States, who traditionally had been closer to their arch-rival Pakistan. For example, the old “Look East Policy”, intended for economic cooperation with Southeast Asia, was rebranded the “Act East Policy”, becoming much more strategic in nature (Malhotra, 2022, p. 20).

From an Indian perspective, this was all to a large extent a balancing act against increased Chinese assertiveness, illustrated for example by the leasing of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka (Kaura, 2020, p. 509). If we follow the hypothesis that China felt threatened, the combination of an Indian attempt to decrease their dependency on Russia in the face of growing international disapproval only contributed to the Chinese loss of security, as the mutual friendship with Russia partly stabilized the relationship. The perception that India was

turning to a more western-friendly outlook could in a Chinese worst-case scenario result in a hostile, nuclear armed state backed up by even stronger states threatening their vulnerable rear, when Chinese political attention was focused on Taiwan and the East China Sea.

The clearest evidence of this shifting Indian policy is perhaps the Quad, being a cooperation between the US, Japan, Australia and India, with China as the natural antagonist. Chinese statements regarding the Quad express clear discomfort in it growing and deepening, reinforcing the theoretical assumption that they would feel threatened (CGTN, 2021). The escalation of the border conflict in 2020 led to further Indian commitment to the Quad, but this process had begun earlier and was certainly known to China (Malhotra, 2022, p. 25). Being a classic example of Waltzian balancing brought on by India possessing less power than China, a unified Quad would neutralize and surpass the Chinese advantages in power contra India, rationally warranting a reaction from China, who would prefer the status quo (Reichwein & Rösch, 2021, p. 9).

Tying this factor together results in a clear case of the realist “security dilemma”, where one states’ fear of another leads to an attempt to strengthen its position, in turn resulting in the other state feeling threatened too (Paipais, 2021, p. 104). This downward spiral can easily be seen in the relationship between India and China, be it Chinese assertiveness on one hand or Indian balancing against it on another. Understanding the growing affiliation of India with its “enemies” as a threat, China had to strengthen their hand towards India on the border. Although realists would disagree on the nature of the security dilemma, most strands of the realist school agree that it exists (Paipais, 2021, p. 104). However, the offensive action that led to an escalation of the conflict can best be explained by Mearsheimer’s variant, which does not distinguish between offensive and defensive measures, insisting instead that all actions of states are motivated by the same goal, power-maximizing (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 34).

This might explain the Chinese motivation for the escalation, but as we’ve seen recently with the Russian war on Ukraine, the wish to weaken a perceived enemy by means of violence runs a clear chance of backfiring, instead uniting and strengthening the adversary (BBC, 2023). If the Chinese intention with the escalation was to stop the Indian turn towards the United States and its allies, it clearly backfired, as these efforts were only accelerated following the clashes (Kaura, 2020, p. 512).

4.2.3 Indian infrastructure construction

Moving on to a more localized factor we can examine the area in question and how actions on the ground could have an effect on the escalation. Owing to the fact that the border runs through largely desolate mountain terrain, there has not been much activity except military patrolling along the LAC since the war in the 1960's (Sharma, 2022). Slowly but surely however, first China and later India realized that the possibility to quickly bring in troops to these remote regions is crucial to stopping any aggressive posturing by the other side. China had been constructing roads and infrastructure in Tibet since its annexation in 1950, but in the late 1990's railways and roads were extended towards the LAC (Liu, 2020, p. 237). The PLA regularly crossed over to the Indian side of the border, but India was very slow to react to these developments, both politically and militarily (USIP, 2020). When the Indian government launched the project *India–China Border Roads* in 1999 the plan was to catch up to China, but construction progressed at a snail's pace due to a lack of political will and an overabundance of red tape (The Diplomat, 2023). In 2006, the Manmohan Singh government oversaw a modest upscaling of the efforts, and after the Doklam clashes in 2017 the pace of construction was significantly increased as the issue received more political attention (The Diplomat, 2023).

It can be clearly seen that recent Indian infrastructure construction did threaten Chinese dominance in the region. Chinese Ambassador to India Sun Weidong stated after the clashes in 2020 that “*since the beginning of this year, the Indian side has continuously built facilities at or crossing the LAC in the Galwan Valley ... and built infrastructures in an attempt to maintain a permanent presence*” (Chinese Consulate Mumbai, 2020). At the very least, it is stated as one of the reasons for the escalation, even though he still claims the Indians provoked the clashes. This once again reads like a textbook example of the realist security dilemma, only at a more local scale. When India strengthened their relative position on the border, the Chinese felt it threatened their current position, and reacted in turn.

According to S. E. Lobell, “*threatening states are identified as those that can expand – states that possess a combination of latent and land power*” (Lobell, 2009, p. 48). India is a perfect example here, as it is growing both economically, militarily and population-wise. China, who fulfilled all of those factors a decade ago, has started to stall in some ways, and finds itself needing to defend its position as the Asian regional hegemon. Since military preparedness is

an integral part of state power according to Morgenthau, from a realist perspective a rising Indian preparedness necessitated a Chinese response (Taliaferro, 2009, p. 203). This view is held by parts of the Indian defense agencies too, who see the “*reduction of the infrastructure differential*” as a key reason for the increased Chinese aggression along the border (The Diplomat, 2023). Material conditions and capabilities have always been central factors in realist international relations analysis, and we can see that they possess explanatory value in this case too (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 36).

4.2.4 The Ladakh Union Territory

Another factor explicitly mentioned by Chinese representatives as a threat to the peace on the border was the announcement that the Indian region of Ladakh would become a Union Territory (The Economic Times, 2019). India’s administrative system has a complex history with many anomalies, but Ladakh, situated as it does next to both China and Pakistan, was until the autumn of 2019 administratively a part of Jammu and Kashmir. That in turn was a state within India, given special status due to its complicated history by article 370 of the Indian constitution (The Economic Times, 2019). When Home Minister Amit Shah abrogated the article, Ladakh was formed as a full Union Territory, fully making it part of India.

The previously ambiguous status of the border region was appreciated by China as it gave some leeway for negotiation about the border. When the Union Territory was formed, this ambiguity was in effect dropped by the Indian government, signifying a decreased will to accommodate Chinese wishes. After the announcement in 2019, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang stated “*China urges the Indian side to earnestly respect Chinese territorial sovereignty, abide by our treaties and uphold peace and tranquility in the border areas and create favorable conditions for proper settlement of boundary question*”, clearly expressing their displeasure at the decision (Economic Times, 2019).

An interesting aspect of this is uncertainty, which has been studied extensively within realist thinking, especially in relation to rationality and the availability of information. Since realist theory contends that states are rational actors, uncertainty of intentions and lack of information are crucial factors in explaining how states nevertheless often take objectively bad decisions. Graham Allison quite famously did not sufficiently address this lack of certainty in his study on the Cuban Missile Crisis, which has been raised as a key weakness in

his analysis (Bendor & Hammond, 1992, p. 306). China certainly did not have total information regarding Indian policy towards the border, and the escalation can hardly be called a resounding success. If China was a totally rational actor and had complete information, they would thus probably not have escalated, resulting in an acceleration of all the factors that they interpreted as challenging their hegemony in the first place, i.e. Indo-US relations, infrastructure construction, international hostility and Indian decisiveness (Kaura, 2020, p. 512).

Deliberately maintaining a certain level of uncertainty is a recurring strategy of states involved in great power competition, and India may very well have consciously chosen this course of action in the past. In the case of Taiwan for example, the United States famously maintains “strategic ambiguity”, deliberately withholding their policy in case of a Chinese aggression, and similar strategies have been adapted with regards to nuclear weapons doctrine by a number of states (Chang-Liao & Fang, 2021, p. 45). The fact that India kept the nature of its border regions ambiguous can be seen as another example of this strategy, seeking to avoid antagonizing China, who in turn appreciated the non-confrontational stance of the Indian government. Given this, the decision to change the status of Ladakh in 2019 and to end the policy of uncertainty was seen by China as a provocation and a threat, as the previous status quo had arguably favored China.

So how can we understand the escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict in the summer of 2020 from a realist perspective? To summarize, realism can help us shed light on power and motivations related to preserving or changing relative power. The fact that China saw a number of developments threatening its position, risking to transform a previously secured backwater into a frontline is one clear takeaway. For a state wishing to maximize its power, this could not be ignored, leading to the escalation and the clashes in Galwan in 2020. Long term developments such as Indian geopolitical balancing coincided with short term decisions such as dropping the uncertainty preferred by China regarding the Ladakh region, and together it resulted in the escalation. This analysis is just one of many possible ways to examine the case, depending on what you deem as important, because in this perspective we have not studied the internal considerations of the actors, only considering their external rational actions in regards to their counterpart. Through realist eyes, *China* was threatened by the changing material conditions on the border and *India* chose to establish the Ladakh Union Territory contrary to Chinese wishes, but an institutionalist would not recognize the solidity

of these actors, arguing that there is an entire arena of politics within them too (Zürn, 2016, p. 201). The following sections will introduce other, slightly more nuanced perspectives in order to broaden and deepen our understanding of how the escalation came to be.

4.3 The institutionalist perspective

Although international power politics can help explain motivations and causes, institutional politics possess an explanatory value on its own. Despite the autocratic nature of the Chinese state, an institutionalist would highlight that Xi Jinping did not personally decide, implement and follow through the escalation on the Indian border. Realists would see no significant difference between the rational considerations of Xi and of the Chinese state as a whole, but to institutionalists the nature and internal politics of state institutions have significant and important effects on the outcome of international relations (Zürn, 2016, p. 201). For example, both the Indian army and the Chinese PLA has according to institutionalists like John Ruggie their own regime of “*mutual expectations, generally agreed-to rules, regulations and plans in accordance with which organizational energies and financial commitments are allocated*” (Bevir, 2022, p. 37). This means that we can not look at a unified Indian or Chinese state through an institutionalist lens, but must rather consider individual actors within the structure of the state apparatus, who over time have developed mechanisms and sensibilities of their own.

Regardless of your ontological stances, this difference in perspective is important, and affords new insights into my case. While Graham Allison in his study had real insight into the organizations and institutions studied, I do not share the same access or information. When looking at the macro-level of geopolitics through a realist lens, this did not extensively affect the analysis, as the actions of the states after all were quite clear, but it will affect my analysis through an institutionalist lens. Since one of the foundations of the school is that the inner workings of organizations can tell us much about broader international relations, information from inside of the organization is very beneficial for conducting reliable research. In order to keep my research solid, I have thus focused on factors where I have both identified a theoretical importance and found sources to back them up. In this vein I will highlight four aspects of the Galwan escalation that possess explanatory value when looking through a theoretical institutionalist lens:

1. The political considerations of the PLA
2. The erstwhile inaction on the issue among the Indian leadership
3. The effects of the border consultations and agreements
4. The institutional memory carried on from previous clashes (primarily those around Doklam in 2017)

In my case, some of the most important institutions are undoubtedly the militaries of the respective states. Since the Chinese are seen to have initiated the military escalation and must have had some motive for it, I will study the role that the PLA played and why they could have acted like they did, searching for motive indicators that explain the dependent variable of escalation (Esaiasson et al, 2012, p. 295). Although it is very secretive about internal matters, we know some interesting aspects that could have had a bearing on the conflict. The political leadership of the states are also very interesting organizations to study, as they certainly have significant influence on the case in their decision-making role. Since India is a more open and democratic system than China, more insight into its political considerations is possible. Institutionalism is also concerned with more abstract institutions, such as agreements and diplomatic regimes, since they too can have logics and values of their own (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013, p. 6). There is much material to draw on from this category in my case, as the conflict has persisted for many years, affording these structures much power of their own. Finally, schools of institutionalism can call attention to the memory of institutions and how past experiences can shape the present (Cosstick, 2021).

As mentioned in the theory section, I will primarily employ two versions of institutionalism to analyze the escalation, rational choice institutionalism and historical institutionalism. I have chosen these versions as they best complement analysis on the sources and factors that are available to me, focusing as they do on rational logics and historical developments such as the struggle for relevance or the stability afforded by time (Rixen & Viola, 2016, p. 7). If I would have the possibility to interview actors within the organizations, or internal documents and messages, the analysis would possibly be structured differently, and importantly, the conclusions could be more definitively proven. I have however done my best to conduct the analysis as scientifically as possible, always proceeding from theoretical points backed up by what we know empirically.

4.3.1 The PLA

Military organizations are always important in cases of conflict, but the PLA is an unusually interesting actor in Chinese politics, stemming from its relatively unique status as it is not technically the national military, but rather the party's military (Chase et al, 2015, p. 44). This means that it is very politically involved and very interested in keeping the power and relevance that they currently possess (Chase et al, 2015, p. 46). To do so they must retain their importance, ensuring funding and political attention. That is relatively easy to do in relation to well observed objectives like conquering Taiwan or countering American ambitions, but the border with India certainly gets much less attention both domestically and externally. According to rational choice theory, individuals and actors always seek to maximize their material self-interest, which means that the army command responsible for the border areas, the Western Theater Command (WTC), would have an interest in redirecting some attention their way (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013, p. 27, Prathibha, 2021). Bearing this in mind, it is not hard to imagine that the general in charge, named Zhao Zongqi at the time, would have an incentive to escalate the border conflict, while still keeping the situation under control (Eurasian Times, 2020). After the fact, it is clear that the escalation no doubt provided him and his command with more resources, manpower and attention, but is there any indication that this theoretical possibility really played into the escalation? This hypothesis is after all quite universally true, so why can this motivation have come into effect at that specific time?

The lack of available primary sources means that we must make informed guesses based on theory and what little information is accessible. I have searched for information from within the PLA both online and in publications, but have found very little. Cost, time and access restricts me from interviewing relevant individuals, and if information does leak, it is beyond my ability to find. This results in a quite likely hypothesis as a best-case result. One thing we can derive from secondary sources is that it seems the commanders of the WTC have tried to improve the combat capabilities of their troops since the major Chinese military reforms in 2015 (Burke & Chan, 2019, p. 227). Xi Jinping himself claimed that a "peace-sickness" exists among the soldiers in the army, meaning a lack of ambition in training and a complacency that peace would persist forever (Prathibha, 2021, p. 5).

In the WTC, this manifested in the fact that exercises were held in the low-lying comfortable regions, while brief periods in more difficult terrain was seen as sufficient mountain-training (Prathibha, 2021, p. 4). There was thus an external political pressure to change the state of the organization at the time. Rationally then, Zhao Zongqi might want to cure his troops of this “peace-sickness” and simultaneously signal to Xi that his words are taken seriously by starting clashes along the border. Seeing the events from this perspective, it does not have to relate much to geopolitics at all, but rather to rational political considerations of an organization like the PLA. It also partly helps explain why the escalation occurred when it did, as the sources point to specific statements and internal changes taking place at the time.

Somewhat complementing this view, is the fact that many realists believe that different aspects of foreign threats affect different parts of a state. When the Indian military position was strengthened due to better infrastructure on the border, the PLA would logically be the most alarmed Chinese entity, much more than financial institutions or even the foreign ministry, as they have the most insight and the most immediate stakes (Lobell, 2009, p. 55). Following this combined theoretical consideration, the Western Theater Command of the PLA could simultaneously have been alarmed by the developments previously mentioned, and seen a possibility to strengthen their position at the same time.

4.3.2 Inaction in the Indian leadership

In this case and in many like it, the agency of the instigator tends to receive most of the attention. However, the Indian side should certainly not be forgotten. China may have initiated the escalation in 2020 (and likewise in most prior clashes), but the actions of the Indian government and military helped set the stage and enabled certain actions and decisions. To fully understand the escalation then, we must also examine the internal situation in India. For both the current and previous Indian leaderships, the border conflict with China has been a complicated mire (Malhotra, 2022, p. 25). In a purely rational way, investments and measures against the arch-enemy Pakistan are extremely politically popular, make sense, and are considered resources well spent. Maintaining perpetual patrols and garrisons on Himalayan peaks against the country's largest trading partner (as of 2020) is however not as easily justifiable politically (Economic Times, 2023). For that reason, the Chinese border conflict has been politically sequestered in India, and scaling up military efforts or infrastructure projects has been slow and complicated (The Diplomat, 2023). These are all

rationally logical political considerations according to a rational choice institutionalist, shaping how the escalation came to occur.

If we examine the Indian political situation from another institutionalist school however, these developments can be understood as a stickiness inherent in the Indian political system, where decisive action on the issue has been disincentivized. Historical institutionalists would argue that the long-running nature of the border conflict has stabilized and self-reinforced political organizations regarding it, making change costly and difficult (Zürn, 2016, p. 205). This despite the fact that a tougher stance on the border logically could be quite popular politically, as surveys show that public opinion had turned against China (Milliff & Staniland, 2022, p. 13).

This can explain how the Indian inaction was persisting, but how then did this lead to the current escalations? Adapting the historical institutionalism perspective, we must also see to the context of the case. The amount of time a certain policy has been in place is not the only important factor, because all developments over time play a part in shaping the options available (Rixen & Viola, 2016, p. 19). For example, the slow but steady construction of infrastructure, as mentioned before, certainly transformed the possibilities of the Indian leadership over time, where a more decisive response became more and more possible.

Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that inaction did not only limit India's available courses of action, it also enlarged the Chinese playbook on the border. Due to the difficult geographical nature of the area, offensive military action is inherently disadvantageous, so a solid political, military and economic commitment by India would probably quite effectively block any Chinese ambitions (USIP, 2020). However, since this has not been the case, China has been able to push and prod to discover where the red lines are. Many sources agree that prior to the Doklam clashes in 2017, Chinese soldiers regularly crossed the LAC, sometimes even setting up camp on the Indian side of the border (Wojczewski, 2016, p. 36). Made possible by the aforementioned Indian inaction, it can be seen to have emboldened the PLA, leading to a belief that the status quo would continue, and that escalations could be initiated, as they probably would be met with little opposition or risk. If we sustain this view of bilateral stickiness, what changed the Indian determination, enabling a more tenacious response and resulting in large casualties?

Historical institutionalists argue that critical junctures are the events that can break the stickiness or “path dependencies” of institutions (Zürn, 2016, p. 217). When crises occur on a sufficient scale, such as potentially the Doklam clashes, the make-up of institutions will determine if it is capable of change or if it is too “sticky”. In this case, it seems that the productive conditions necessary were in place, and that the Indian leadership could oversee a change (Zürn, 2016, p. 217). It remains to be seen if a similarly critical juncture was reached on the Chinese side after repeated escalations in 2017, 2020 and 2022 were met with limited success. The stickiness of the passive stance the Indian political establishment had towards the border was an enabler of China and a brake on Indian action, and it helps further our understanding of how the escalation in 2020 could come about.

4.3.3 Border consultations and agreements

Institutionalists also look at agreements and fora for cooperation as important factors setting the stage for international relations, and there have indeed been regular consultations aiming to maintain the peace along the border for many decades. The latest version of these is called the “Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India–China Border Affairs” (Library of Congress, 2020). The fact that this forum was in place, and indeed continued to operate through the escalation, may very well have provided a check on further escalation into outright war. In order to understand the effect that these consultations had on the crisis, we can again turn to historical institutionalism, observing the “stickiness” that these consultations and agreements have resulted in.

To begin with, the “Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas” from 1996 resulted in the prevalent practice that troops patrolling in the border areas did not bring guns, a practice which has largely held until now (UN, 2023). It is not difficult to imagine that the escalation in 2020 would be more alarming for both sides if the soldiers had guns with them. As it was, casualties resulted from melees with clubs and other improvised weapons, but primarily from soldiers falling to their death (Green, 2020, p. 3). It is a testament to the path dependency that the talks and agreements created that it took many months of clashes and casualties until shots were first fired in September of 2020 (Chubb, 2020). From this

perspective, these agreements are important factors that can explain why the escalation turned out as it did, both why it occurred in the first place and why it did not escalate further.

From a rationalist point of view, it might initially seem strange that China, being the instigating part, would continue to commit to talks and discussions. However, this can be understood as an insurance policy, minimizing the possible negative consequences of the escalation. With these structures in place and active, it would be much harder for India to reduce economic and political ties, as opposed to a situation where China cut off all diplomatic communication. To break the stickiness created by over 25 years of agreements takes great effort, and if no apparent gain would result from it, it would be preferable to continue with the diplomatic efforts. Keeping in mind the fact that the trade balance between the countries is in favor of China, and that India has diplomatic commitments to Chinese projects such as the SCO, continued engagement was probably preferred, as there is no indication that China intended these clashes to expand into open conflict (Liu, 2020, p. 224 & Madan, 2020). The agreements in place thus served as a force keeping the risk of further geopolitical escalation and danger in check and in consequence simultaneously made possible that the escalation could serve its purpose without any large scale material losses for China.

4.3.4 Institutional memory

Examining the concept of institutional memory can also help us better understand the events of 2020. To do this we can look at the previous major clashes on the border, in 2017 in Doklam, at the tri-point of the border between Bhutan, China and India (Kaura, 2020, p. 503). That crisis is perceived to have kicked off with Chinese road construction into an area considered Bhutanese by Bhutan and India, which led to an Indian response (Kaura, 2020, p. 503). It carries significant importance to the developments in 2020, as the memory of it would have been fresh in the minds of both sides, affecting their logics, values and routines.

Additionally, the same Chinese general, Zhao Zongqi, was in charge of both clashes, signifying a clear connection between the two events (Eurasian Times, 2020). The term “institutional memory” traditionally refers to information repositories within organizations, a crucial factor for informed decision-making and well-adapted processes in institutions like a military force (Cosstick, 2021). Applying it brings yet another aspect to the puzzle of our

case, one that many institutionalists would find crucial, as it inevitably had a large effect on the organizations involved in 2020.

Looking strictly at the lessons that could have been learned from the Doklam clash in 2017, it did not result in any apparent change in the status quo on the border, but the Chinese might still have learned that the resolve of the Indian army had grown, as they did resist. Due to this they might have set their minds on using more force next time, and they indeed did bring more soldiers and equipment in 2020 (Green, 2020, p. 3). The Indian side on the other hand learned that they could in fact stand up to China, and was thus committed to continue resisting any future advances. This combination of differing memories could help explain the surge in casualties reported in the 2020 clashes.

The Indian army has however at times been criticized for glossing over strategic mistakes and not sufficiently tending to its institutional memory, perhaps weakening the lessons learned (Sharma, 2017). Additionally, the Doklam and Galwan clashes were the responsibilities of two different Indian military commands, the Eastern and Northern respectively, which further complicates a smooth passing of institutional memory between the two events (India Today, 2022). However, the political attention that Doklam received at least ensured that the will to resist was there in 2020, if not more specific tactical lessons. Keeping in mind on the other hand that the same Chinese command and even the same general were in charge during both events, many interesting considerations arise, as the potential for beneficial passing of experience and information was greater on the Chinese side. We must note however, that institutional memory is most often considered to be constituted by many aspects beyond the knowledge and experience of individuals such as filing systems, organizational routines, norms and values, which are difficult to appraise from an outside perspective (Cosstick, 2021).

One interesting consideration is that due to the institutional memory of just 3 years earlier, the Chinese were most likely aware of the increased Indian determination. Seeing as they resisted perceived advances in 2017, they would surely do the same in 2020 (Kaura, 2020, p. 504). This further strengthens the general understanding in the global discourse that the Chinese deliberately initiated the escalation in the summer of 2020, as it seems very unlikely that Zhao Zongqi did not expect Indian resistance to major Chinese patrols across the LAC.

In effect, the PLA knew what it was doing, and the escalation was thus most certainly not an accident or a misunderstanding.

Secondly, this also tells us that the PLA command could very likely have learned tactical lessons from the Doklam clashes. Admittedly, the clashes resulted in very little actual battlefield changes, but soldiers dying is always an important factor, even in states that are far from democratic. Since no casualty figures were officially released by China at the time (later claiming just four soldiers killed), we can not know what the escalation costed in terms of lives (Reuters, 2021). There is however at least some theoretical reason to believe that greater information retention in the PLA in between the two clashes could have resulted in lower casualties for the PLA than for the Indian army, who reported 20 killed (The Hindu, 2020). Importantly, both sides have significant political interests in changing the numbers, both for withholding losses from the general public and for giving the event a political meaning. Third party sources have speculated extensively about casualty figures, as it has interesting implications for a range of actors, but it is important to reiterate that with the currently available information it is impossible to determine the real numbers with any certainty.

To summarize, an institutional perspective helps shed light on the considerations, motivations and effects that different organizations and institutions had on the clashes of 2020. My research question concerns how we can understand the escalation of the border conflict in 2020, and without acknowledging the internal workings of these entities, we lose a crucial factor of explanation. Looking strictly at geopolitical explanations the decision to initiate the escalation can seem confusing, especially in regards to the fairly unimpressive results that we commented on in the last section. When we for example consider the goals of the PLA, they can help bring more clarity to how and why the escalation was initiated, and using institutional memory we could see that the PLA would have had quite a good grasp of the probable results. This perspective generally affords us a greater understanding of the reasons for the event, and helps to explain the effect that the consultations and agreements that exist between the states had on the development of the conflict, and how Indian domestic politics could have shaped the options available to China.

4.4 The constructivist perspective

After examining the geopolitical realist and the more zoomed in and multilayered institutional aspects of the escalation, there are still questions that remain unanswered. In Graham Allison's original model for understanding an event, this is where he stops, but since the 1970's the theoretical scene of political science has developed. One school that has grown substantially since then is constructivism, which can provide wholly different insights, being based on the ontological belief that the world is socially constructed and on an epistemological aversion to positivism (Zehfuss, 2002, p. 2). Introducing social aspects into the model makes for a much broader and deeper understanding that can complement the still very relevant realist and institutionalist considerations.

In this final analytical section I will mainly employ the constructivist conception of rules, norms and decisions as well as language, as popularized by Nicholas Onuf and Friedrich Kratochwil (McCourt, 2022, p. 53-54). I will focus once again on four factors that can contribute to answering my research question, like the other perspectives affected by the sources available. Constructivism emphasizes the importance of language, and there is a fair amount of speeches, statements and interviews available to draw from, benefitting analysis through this perspective (Zehfuss, 2002, p. 19). I have also considered these four factors in relation to the previously studied ones in order to achieve complementarity in the new perspective, with the aim to answer my research question and expand our understanding of the escalation. The factors are:

1. The norms governing Chinese foreign policy
2. Indian public opinion changing the rules and norms for policymakers
3. Language games and the war of words
4. The broader context of hindu nationalism

Given the availability of official statements for example, it is a good fit to study the norms and values guiding the actors of the conflict, as it can tell us things that the logical perspectives of realism or rational choice institutionalism could not. With constructivism, choices that are outwardly "unreasonable" can be explained, and contexts and social pressures can broaden our understanding of the case. This being the last lens, we can also

start to see the differences between the theories, both in what explanations they can offer, and in which aspects they would deem important.

Looking at the escalation in Galwan through a realist lens for example, we could see that Chinese assertiveness had grown in prior years, a trend which was not reversed with the onset of the pandemic. From that perspective the focus was on power, changing material conditions and hegemonies, but little attention was afforded to social factors. A constructivist would see the Chinese assertiveness in another light, for example arguing that the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the world, transforming many social norms and resulting in a totally different landscape. The business of diplomacy was hampered by travel restrictions, and Alexander Wendt would perhaps say that states made even more anarchy of the international system (Zehfuss, 2002, p. 4). Reduced engagement with other states thus led to less influences from states with other prevailing norms, and more reliance on top-down communication and the internal norms of the Chinese administration.

4.4.1 Norms in Chinese foreign policy

So what were the prevailing norms regarding foreign policy in China? For many decades China took a passive role in international relations, only at times interfering in strictly regional matters. The guiding principle of Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy was for example "*Hide your strength, bide your time*", but with Xi Jinping's rise to power, that time was deemed to have come, as Chinese official language on foreign policy changed into a much more interventionist and assertive tone (Aljazeera, 2014). In the early years of his tenure, Xi for example made statements about wanting to preserve "*harmony without uniformity*" in Brussels in 2014, signaling a non-assertive stance (Embassy of China in Ireland, 2014). It is of course important to note that official statements are not necessarily what governs internal norms, especially in non-democratic systems, but what is said externally still broadly frames the prevailing attitudes. At the very least, they represent the values that the state wants to project.

Five years later in 2019, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated in an interview referring to the relationship with the United States that "*the one who uses zero-sum games will never be able to retreat without hurting itself*", inferring that China would not stand down and would be more confrontative (People's Daily, 2019). Just a few weeks prior to the escalation in 2020,

Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe said that China should “*use fighting to promote stability*”, referring to a perceived worsening of China’s security situation (Green, 2020, p. 2). This is language that the norms present in Chinese foreign policy just a decade earlier would not produce, illustrating that both the language and the norms have changed. These changes have been slight and incremental, but it is telling nonetheless as it enabled a shift in what is seen as possible and appropriate for Chinese foreign policy.

If we acknowledge the findings reached with the institutionalist perspective and suppose that the PLA was fully aware that clashes would erupt, it follows from a constructivist perspective that creating escalation on the borders must be within the acceptable limits of the norms present in the Chinese foreign policy and military circles. According to Kratochwil, the escalation could be seen as a “speech act”, enabled by the norms and at the same time shaping the norms (McCourt, 2022, p. 56). If this perspective holds true, it would be very likely that similar events should happen again, as the norms in the PLA can be seen as accepting of escalations, and this is also the case, most recently in December of 2022, where clashes resulted in multiple injured soldiers being reported (Foreign Policy, 2022).

Keeping the concept of “speech acts” in mind, we can examine what the Chinese officially communicated about the Galwan escalation as it happened. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in official communication all of the blame has been laid on India (Office of the Chinese Chargé d’Affaires to Lithuania, 2020). Keeping in mind the overwhelming evidence that China was the instigating party, this shows that despite the apparent changes in internal administrative Chinese norms and language, the prevailing international norms were still strong enough that China had to conform to them. Judging from previous statements, many motivations could be put forward for the escalation, but the choice fell on denying. For example, in its communication about the invasion of Ukraine, Russia acknowledged being the instigators, but provided many motivations to explain why (BBC, 2023). While the veracity of these motivations are lacking to say the least, this was an option for China as well. The choice they made in their communication is thus a factor that helps us understand the event as whole, and a factor that Graham Allison’s original model would miss, since it leaves out socially constructed perspectives.

4.4.2 Indian public opinion

While the internal norms of the Chinese state are highly relevant, the norms of public opinion are relevant in a democracy like India. In the previous chapter we examined the role that Indian inaction on the border issue had through a political and institutional lens, but let us now take a constructivist view of the situation in India. This section will identify many similar factors as the institutional view, but will bring new insights and perspectives too, contributing to our understanding of the escalation in 2020. Through studying the opinions expressed by the Indian people in surveys, we can identify social pressures and norms. In 2022, Aidan Milliff and Paul Staniland assembled past survey data concerning Indian attitudes towards China, resulting in a very useful source for assessing Indian popular opinion (Milliff & Staniland, 2022). The role of public opinion is much greater in a democracy as opposed to a one-party state like China (although certainly not unimportant there either), due to the fact that politicians both need to win elections and broadly follow the trends of public opinion in order to ensure minimum resistance from the population in carrying out their policies.

India had a general election in 2019, where Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) reaffirmed and strengthened their dominant position in Indian politics (Kaura, 2020, p. 511). This meant that appealing to voters was not as important during the escalation as it would have been during an election campaign for instance, but it was nonetheless a factor, as India has rolling state elections. However, just as important as the effects of election-campaigning are the norms and social rules that public opinion creates. For many years, the Chinese border had been far back in the minds of most Indian citizens, as other issues were considered more pressing (Milliff & Staniland, 2022, p. 20). In this state of affairs, there was little social pressure on politicians to act on this issue. Onuf would argue that not enough deeds, acts or words were done and spoken by the public to create a situation where the norm was to decisively act on the border (McCourt, 2022, p. 73).

This slowly started to change with the Doklam clashes in 2017, which received a fair bit of media attention in India, much more than for example the limited clashes in 2013 (Milliff & Staniland, 2022, p. 17). However, despite the aggression the Modi government was very interested in stabilizing relations with China, seeking to downplay the significance of the clashes in Doklam (Milliff & Staniland, 2022, p. 13). It took until the deadly clashes in 2020

for the government to finally comply with the already strong demand for a tougher stance towards China. At this point, data shows that social rules were inescapably formed that meant an Indian prime minister would need to engage with the issue to not lose significant support among the population (Milliff & Staniland, 2022, p. 13). With this steady decline in Indian public opinion towards China, constructivists would note the shrinking feasibility of appeasement and hushing up the event, as the social pressure was strong enough to warrant decisive action. This social and political pressure flowing over into the military leadership can be seen as one of the reasons for the increased fatality rate in the escalation, as the norms had changed from trying to soothe tensions to actively resisting Chinese actions.

4.4.3 Language games

In his original model, Graham Allison did not include a constructivist lens, which also meant that he did not have an opportunity to closely study the element of language in his analysis. For a realist, that is not a weakness, as language is seen as simply a tool for power to pass through, but for constructivists, it is highly important, as it can both produce and transform power in many ways (McCourt, 2022, p. 58). I include this aspect since as we will see, it demonstrably had a significant effect on the events in 2020, and studying it both contributes to the broader understanding of the case and to the development of Allison's model. The escalation was conducted by people with tangible weapons, but at the same time a conflict of words was taking place. As previously mentioned, both sides blamed the other for the clashes, claiming that their own forces had been strictly defensive. Regardless of the truthfulness of the statements, the language used tells a story of itself, as the use of language according to constructivists is highly practical, and always done with a purpose (McCourt, 2022, p. 73). We stated earlier that the Chinese did not necessarily have to blame India for initiating, as the international norms were demonstrably not hard social "rules", which leaves the question of why they did so after all.

Chinese ambassador to India, Sun Weidong, did an interview with the Press Trust of India on June 26th 2020, in the midst of the escalation (Chinese Consulate Mumbai, 2020). In that interview, it is clear that he tries to invoke the "rules" of the game on the Sino-Indian border. Employing another constructivist term for analysis, language games can be seen as the commonly agreed upon rules of a certain context. They entail what is possible, how you can "play", and affords meaning to actions, shaping reality (Howard, 2004, p. 813). We can see

the invocation of this in many of ambassador Weidong's statements on the crisis, accusing the Indians of breaking the negotiated rules and highlighting that China followed the rules:

"...the Indian side crossed the LAC first."

"...the Indian border troops copped out on the consensus reached at the commander-level meeting..."

"...the Chinese side has lodged representations on multiple occasions to the Indian side through military and diplomatic channels." (Chinese Consulate Mumbai, 2020)

All of this is evidence of a very deliberate use of language, not only to shift blame, but in an attempt to construct an image of China as a responsible player in the game of international relations. It is of course possible for actors to change the existing games, and it happens quite often, but in this case it seems that the Chinese leadership deemed it appropriate or were constrained enough at the time to continue playing the current game. Doing so ensures stability and is certainly less threatening than an outright revisionist posture, which also was an option (Howard, 2004, p. 813).

In effect, the Chinese did not necessarily wish to disrupt the status quo, but rather to advance and strengthen their positions within the current "game". One aspect of this might be brinkmanship, as China certainly was in no position to fight a full-scale war with India in 2020. With the chosen course of action, the Indians still knew the rules of the game they were playing, and that de-escalation was still a viable option. Since the potential risk in a conflict with India is high, bearing in mind the fact that both states have nuclear weapons, some safety measures were probably preferable, resulting in this war of words over who truly followed the rules. This also echoes the brinkmanship of the U.S.-Soviet "game" during the Cold War (Howard, 2004, p. 813). In effect, studying the language of the conflict helps to answer my research question by explaining why the situation did not escalate even further, why the Chinese continued blaming the Indians for it, and in extension how the decision to escalate was deemed feasible and not considered a massive risk.

4.4.4 Hindu nationalism

Similarly to historical institutionalism, constructivism values historical analysis and emphasizes the constitutivity of specific cases (McCourt, 2022, p. 57). Placing the Galwan clashes in a broader context have already afforded us new insights and a deeper understanding of the escalation, but for the last analytical section I will look to the recent historical and social context on its own, exploring how it can help me answer my research question, and further expand on the coverage of my methodological model.

Indian, and more specifically, hindu nationalism is one aspect that has so far played a relatively minor role in my analysis, but as a defining factor of the modern Indian state it bears some consideration in the context (Kinnvall & Singh, 2022, p. 2). Keeping with the constructivist theoretical assumption that all cases have unique logics depending on their historical and social contexts, the fact that hindu nationalism has risen to be a significant force in India will have had an impact on the border conflict with China. Narendra Modi and the BJP party was elected on a platform of hindu nationalism, *hindutva*, seeking to strengthen India and the concept of hindu supremacy, which in its nature compares India to other states (Bhattacharjee, 2017). Hindutva has seen much criticism since the election of 2014 and the start of Narendra Modi's premiership, but has nevertheless remained popular in India (Bhattacharjee, 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic that erupted in early 2020 was a threat to this idea of a strong and fiercely proud Indian state, as it demonstrated serious insufficiencies in the capacity of the state to handle the crisis, creating an even stronger imperative to prove the strength of India (Kinnvall & Singh, 2022, p. 10).

The government's answer to this was to double down on this rhetoric, incorporating hindu religious imagery, striking back at criticism and even officially peddling hindutva-coded pseudoscience remedies for the virus (Kinnvall & Singh, 2022, p. 12). Keeping this tense and aggravated situation during the summer of 2020 in mind, it seems reasonable that a Chinese border provocation would elicit an animated response by the Indian public. Since we saw from the institutionalist lens that the internal logic of the Indian leadership had changed and that popular opinion too had turned against China, this is an important factor in the equation. As previously mentioned, the government and Narendra Modi originally had a much more conciliatory stance towards China, but with the strongly nationalistic situation they had helped create, their options for negotiation were limited, and determined resistance to China

was more or less politically unavoidable. Taken together, both statistics, secondary sources and theory show that pressures emanated from many directions for the Indian government to change their conciliatory stance towards China, and adopt one more combative.

We can see from a constructivist perspective that the context of the case mattered, and not just the prior clashes, the pandemic, or the hindu nationalism on their own, but the full context taken together. This lens thus gave us another way to understand the escalation, from a socially constructed and historically contingent perspective rather than from a universalist rational one. My research question asked how we can understand the escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict, and this section represents an answer that focuses on the “how”, as opposed to the realist lens which searches for concrete and rational explanations as to why it occurred.

5. Discussion

Now that we have explored and discovered many explanatory factors, important considerations and the broader context, it is time to synthesize these insights. I will first examine the differences and possible similarities between the findings of the three theoretical lenses, and weigh positives and negatives. Then I will discuss what was gained or lost through the use of this specific model, followed by an attempt to answer my research question by taking all of the insights together and examining what we have learned about the case. At the end my study will be placed into a broader research perspective, discussing lessons learned and some speculations about possible further research.

5.1 Evaluating lenses

To reiterate, the research question for this study was the following:

“How can we understand the escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict in the summer of 2020?”

In order to answer this, I have modified Graham Allison’s three lens-model to analyze the case through a multitude of theoretical perspectives, namely realism, institutionalism and constructivism. This has resulted in a broader understanding of the complexities of the case, but it has also brought with it insights into the merits of the different lenses and their differences and similarities.

The ontological and epistemological differences between the schools are clear, with institutionalism and especially realism focusing on the positivist, tangible factors of the conflict, like military and economic power and physical infrastructure (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 55). It was clear that while the realism of Mearsheimer could aptly explain the “lashing out” by China in a situation where its relative power position was vulnerable, it struggled somewhat to identify the specifics of the case. Following the universalist ambitions of the school, if all states lash out militarily when their position is threatened, why are there not many more conflicts, especially during the pandemic which saw massive reductions in state capabilities?

Zooming in on more micro-level factors did help here, with the institutionalist perspective certainly providing interesting context to the realist explanation. Relying quite heavily on logical action as well, we could identify the motivations and forces pulling specific actors, like the PLA or the Indian government, in certain directions. My choice to adapt the original methodological model came with great benefits on the whole, but it did mean a lesser focus on what Allison called “bureaucratic politics”, examining the political considerations of specific individuals. A bit of this approach was incorporated into the rational institutionalist perspective, but the difficulty of scientifically studying the personal considerations of for example Xi Jinping was too great due to the limited information available.

In his third section, Allison did somewhat touch on social aspects and even early forms of what can be seen as language games, but although he did afford actors their own specific goals, the main driver for them was still rational deliberations (Allison, 1971, p. 162). The inclusion of constructivism in my study meant that other, less palpable concepts and motivations could be studied, such as social norms and pressures, speech acts and language games. Constructivism by design lacks the predictive quality of the more universalist and rationally minded schools, as does historical institutionalism, but that stems from a more qualitative approach, seeking to more deeply understand the specifics of a case rather than to find patterns and logical proofs.

For the purposes of my study then, the more descriptive perspectives did afford a more comprehensive understanding of the case, while the rational approaches provided singular clear motivations and explanations. By combining them, I thus received quite a thorough set of insights that complemented each other, representing both context, longer term developments and short term factors. Since my research question sought how we can understand the escalation, this result represents a fitting answer to the question, covering many different aspects of the case. Illuminating which of these explanatory factors are contingent on which theoretical assumptions also contributes to the answer by solidifying them and grounding them in literature and prior political science research.

As previously mentioned, the purpose of my study has not been to identify a “winning” perspective, but some evaluation is still possible, and indeed prudent for a broader benefit. The lack of first hand sources in my case somewhat hampered the institutionalist lens, as it

benefits from insight into the inner workings of organizations and institutions. On its own it would in my case provide a fairly weak scientific analysis of the case, since much of the results gained from it derived from qualified hypotheses using theoretical concepts. Realism on the other hand relies primarily on more available information like statistics and geopolitical power balances, which mostly is quite tangible and at a researcher's disposal. The sources needed for analysis through constructivism were somewhat available too, as statements and wording by nature is public. Extrapolating these insights, we might claim that institutionalism is better suited for analyzing cases where sources are more freely available. My choice of methodology thus helped to negate some of the weaknesses presented by individual perspectives.

5.2 Merits of the model and results

Evaluating the effects of my methodological choices are certainly interesting and of value, but the purpose of the study is after all to better understand the escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict in the summer of 2020, so what have we learned? I will structure the factors in line with the theoretical perspectives that have identified them as important.

We could see that the geopolitical balance in the region had started to shift, as India itched closer to the United States through collaboration with for example the Quad. This clearly alarmed China, challenging their status as the regional hegemon. Another aspect that threatened to shift the material capabilities of the states was an increased rate of infrastructure construction by the Indian state on the border, both quite fitting examples of a security dilemma. While these processes steadily progressed and threatened the Chinese position, the proclamation of the Ladakh Union Territory in 2019 and the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 provided more imminent push-factors, motivating and enabling decisive action on the border.

At the same time as these factors transpired, the People's Liberation Army had internal reasons to demonstrate their combat readiness and their importance within the system of the Chinese state. The Western Theater Command specifically, in charge of the border region, had strategic reasons to act in order to ensure its continued relevance in the face of increasing attention elsewhere. This was made possible by the long term negligence of the issue by the

Indian leadership, and the institutional stickiness resulting from it, impeding decisive action. However, in the years leading up to the escalation, this state of affairs slowly started to change as an effect of institutional memory carried over from the clashes around Doklam in 2017. This memory was most pronounced on the Chinese side, but the Indians too had started to learn. While these developments took place, the border consultations and the agreements on not carrying weapons while patrolling helped to disfavor large-scale hostilities, and kept the broader relationship between the two states fairly stable. The escalatory tendencies can thus be said to have existed outside of the established diplomatic relationship, possessing a rationale of its own.

The social systems had rationales of their own too, and over the last decade the norms in Chinese foreign policy had slowly but surely transformed into one more accepting of assertive action. We could see that the language used and the ideas expressed by Chinese representatives had become tougher and less open to compromise. Evidence also emerged that quite strongly confirms the belief that China initiated the clashes deliberately. And while the Indian leadership had maintained an appeasing stance to China, the Indian public had over years of provocations turned decisively against their northern neighbor, creating social and political pressure as well as the possibility to change course. Further facilitating this turn was the growth and prominence of hindu nationalism, turned even stronger due to the uncertainties of the pandemic, which favored a strong India that stood up to its rivals. Supported by the government, this force further added to the potential of abandoning the appeasing and outwardly friendly relationship with China. Finally, the use of language during the crisis tells us about the “rules of the game”, and how the two sides chose to frame the escalation. It also reflects that there still was some form of predictability and stability inherent in the issue, keeping the escalation from developing into a broader and bigger armed conflict, which none of the sides seem to have wanted.

While it was somewhat contained, the effects of the event were certainly significant. Indian popular anger was considerable, leading to the issue getting significantly more attention in parliament, the Modi administration banning a number of Chinese mobile apps, and to a further increase of its commitment to the border. Combined with the pandemic, the clashes also contributed to China being supplanted by the United States as India’s largest trading partner. Regardless of the original intentions, the results tell us that most of the factors that led to an escalation are still there, and many of them have only intensified. If we attempt a

theoretical prediction, this would mean that more conflict can be expected on the Sino-Indian border in the future. In fact, clashes continued on a smaller scale throughout 2020, and a larger incident was reported in December 2022 with multiple injured soldiers (Foreign Policy, 2022). It seems quite likely that this state of affairs will continue if the developments examined in this study persists.

5.3 Broader literature, lessons, and further research

Building from these results, it would certainly be interesting and worthwhile to conduct further research on the Sino-Indian border conflict. This study showed that both long term and short term factors resulted in the deadly clashes in 2020, and since there is reason to believe that the long term factors persist, it could be of real value to decision-makers and scholars alike to study the outlook for the future. China and India are after all two very significant states, both situated in the Indo-Pacific, a region that many identify as the chief strategic stage for the near future (Gov.UK, 2022). Understanding, and perhaps even predicting trends in this conflict can thus be highly beneficial and valuable.

I have also demonstrated that my iteration of the model that Graham Allison first pioneered more than 50 years ago is an efficient way to illuminate a broad range of facets of an event, drawing upon the breadth of the political science world. By modifying and updating it to the contemporary scene of international relations, it can bring with it a deeper understanding that transcends the personal beliefs of the researcher. Like Steve Smith contended already in 1980, Allison missed out on the values of actors, instead seeing them as rational and more or less interchangeable (Smith, 1980, p. 30). My version can offer a remedy to this flaw by including the constructivist perspective, and as David Marsh & Gerry Stoker argued, *“Good research design follows principles which you learn over the years in your studies, often by understanding what others have done in similar situations and adapting their solutions”* (Marsh & Stoker, 2010, p. 247). My chosen model and structure results in a study less focused and perhaps less clearly predictive than what could have been with other methods, but in allowing for many lenses it can also be presented more readily to a layperson, just like Allison’s study did very successfully. This aspect certainly has a value of its own, not to be overlooked by scholars.

This study has identified and coalesced the factors that have played a part in the escalation of the conflict, and a number of other scholars and analysts have ventured to differing extents to do the same. My study disproves the conclusion reached by scholars such as Liu Zongyi that India was the initiating party, and shows instead that while Indian actions did play a part, it was a conscious Chinese decision to escalate (Liu, 2020, p. 226). This study has also confirmed Douglas Gibler's theoretical assertion that domestic politics have a significant bearing on international territorial conflict, by showing how the Indian public opinion transformed the possibilities and pressures for the leadership (Gibler, 2012, p. 2).

By expanding on and confirming the relevance of the factors brought up by scholars and analysts such as Ashok Sharma, Will Green and Tanvi Madan, I have provided new insights into our understanding of the escalation (Sharma, 2020, Green, 2020 & Madan, 2020). In one respect, one can argue that my primary contribution lies in collecting these factors together, and theoretically and scientifically motivating why they are relevant. However, what makes my study quite unique in the literature of this case, is the combination of case and method. By adapting and improving Allison's model, I have shown the theoretical assumptions that lead to the distinct explanatory factors, breaking down why certain aspects are deemed important through different perspectives. In doing so, my study has contributed to the literature on this case and answered my research question, which asked how we can understand the escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict in the summer of 2020.

6. Conclusion

This study has attempted to answer the following research question:

“How can we understand the escalation of the Sino-Indian border conflict in the summer of 2020?”

I did this through a modified version of Graham Allison’s three-lens model, applying a realist, institutionalist and a constructivist perspective to the case, illuminating different causal and contextual factors, and clarifying the assumptions that they rest upon.

Through the analysis it was clear that many different factors interacted to produce the escalation of the conflict. Long term aspects such as the increased assertiveness of Chinese foreign policy, the slow but steady Indian pivot towards the United States and the changing views of the Indian public provided the conditions necessary for an escalation. At the same time, more immediate factors like the Covid-19 pandemic, the internal pressures on the PLA and the proclamation of the Ladakh Union Territory represented motivations and developments turning the conflict to violence again. We could also see how some factors were stabilizing forces preventing even further escalation, such as the language games in place and the consultations and agreements in existence.

All in all, the study has shown the complexity of the Sino-Indian border conflict, and the many factors that had an impact on its escalation. Unfortunately, many of these are still extant, and only the future can tell if high noon will slowly turn to night on Sino-Indian relations.

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