How Status-seeking States Can Cooperate: Explaining India–China Rapprochement After the Doklam Standoff

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Abstract
Noticing the gap in the existing literature, this article attempts to argue that status-seeking motives do not necessarily result in zero-sum games and hence tries to summarise conditions for status-seekers to manage conflicts and realise cooperation with one another through creative use of social mobility and creativity strategies. As a case study, this article examines the evolving relations between India and China since 2013 and demonstrates how relations between these two status-seeking states can become confrontational with conflicting status-seeking incentives. For some time, the status competition seemingly dominated their interactions, when India was not willing to accept China’s power status second only to the USA, and China reluctant to recognise India as another rising power with nuclear capabilities. After the Donglang (Doklam) standoff, both governments are finding ways to manage an indirect path for cooperation through a newly discovered multilateral framework. The elements contributing to the stability of their relations lie in their choice of international identity and political calculations in which they can engage with the other based on their shared interests in fostering solidarity among developing countries.

Keywords
Social status theory, status competition, rising power, India–China relations, Doklam standoff, rapprochement

Introduction
The collective rise of developing countries is reshaping international structure. China and India, as two major rising powers in the international system, are
competing for higher international status while collectively bargaining for broader representation, and sometimes, they form new institutions to better voice their positions on international affairs. Amidst the reshaping and restructuring of international structures, the social status theory is increasingly implicated in discussions of how the dominant power can handle the status concerns of rising powers. Abundant literature discusses how status-seeking states can send signals and acquire recognition of their ascribed status by the hegemon. However, few scholarly works discuss how status-seeking states should handle the relations among themselves, what would happen if their status ambition clashes and how they can find ways to manage their differences and resolve conflicts. Noticing the gap in the existing literature, this article attempts to argue that status-seeking motives do not necessarily result in zero-sum games and hence tries to summarise conditions for status-seekers to manage conflicts and realise cooperation with one another through creative use of social mobility and creativity strategies. As a case study, this article demonstrates how relations between India and China, both status-seekers, can become confrontational with conflicting status-seeking incentives, and how these states are finding ways to manage an indirect path for cooperation through a newly discovered multilateral framework.

**Status Concerns and Relations Between Status-seeking States**

*Status Concerns in International Politics*

The concept of status in international politics implies that states are ranked similarly to structures witnessed in social hierarchies. International society is hierarchical when states are classified into the dominant power (or the hegemon), the rising power(s), the regional power and small states. In the international system, state actors are involved in competing for stratification similar to that of social structures, and they pursue material gains, such as security and economic interests, as well as non-material resources, such as status. By equalling or surpassing the accomplishments of other countries, the nation as a whole can subsequently gain the respect of others. Such assumptions are in line with the general proposition of social status which is largely regarded as a positional good, a relative term stressing how much one has in relation to others. ‘If everyone has high status’, Schweller (1999, p. 29) notes, ‘no one does’. While one actor might increase its status, all cannot simultaneously do so. When the status hierarchy is perceived to be unstable or illegitimate, aspiring powers may engage in social competition, which usually entails military displays and aggression.

Despite some pessimistic assumptions regarding state relations as governed by status concerns, politics between rising powers and their relations are not always a zero-sum game (Pu, 2017). While national capabilities can be measured by military and economic strength in absolute terms, status is considered as a relational concept (Duque, 2018, p. 585). Status is also believed to be a socially
constructed product in international society, and hence, it must be recognised and accepted by international society regardless of whether a state believes itself to be entitled to or capable of a certain status. Therefore, it is important for rising powers to adopt effective strategies to influence international society and thus obtain international belief in their self-ascribed status.

The status concerns of rising powers indicate that they actually pursue membership in certain groups that enjoy respectable positions in international affairs (Renshon, 2016, pp. 519–520). Status as a rising power or superpower is not a gift but must be earned (Lebow, 2016, p. 162). Larson and Shevchenko distinguish three typical strategies for a rising power to pursue preferred status: social mobility (lifting its status by accepting the norms and emulating the behaviour of a higher-status group), social competition (increasing its capability or capacity in certain area in which a higher-status group usually has a superior position) and social creativity (stressing its achievement in an alternative dimension) (Larson, 2017; Larson & Shevchenko, 2010). In a general sense, the rising power can choose any of the three strategies or combine any two or even three strategies to elevate their position into the elite club. Therefore, this project determines three scenarios into which relations between status-seeking states can fall when they choose certain strategies to manage their status ambitions.

**Three Typical Status Strategies**

First, the social mobility strategy implies that the status quo will be more likely to be preserved when other major powers choose to respect, recognise or accommodate the status concerns of rising power(s), the process of which, in turn, will reinforce its/their commitment to respect and seek recognition within the established international order. Therefore, the scenario of relations between rising powers in which social mobility strategy prevails tends to be more peaceful by redistributing elite club seats to rising ones. It is also true that the relations between status-seeking states could be more peaceful in such a scenario, and an inclusive international system provides space for them to co-exist and co-prosper.

Second, the social competition strategy tends to produce more worrisome scenarios in which other powers, including the dominant power and/or the competing rising power(s), choose to disrespect, misrecognise or even deny the status concerns of rising powers, the process of which will be more likely to trigger a revisionist tendency of rising powers. Inferiority on these important dimensions may lead the status-seekers to adopt an aggressive strategy to fight for upper positions on the ladders of international hierarchy, leading to the relations between the seeker and the hegemon becoming violent or aggressive in nature (e.g., military displays) when the elite clubs are impermeable to newly ascended powers and if the status-seeker is denied status accession (Larson, 2017). The same is true between rising powers, especially when they are either competing for the same but exclusive status or seeking recognition from one another as major members of international society.

Third, the social creativity strategy might require the rising powers to establish an alternative set of values and status that is admired and accepted by international
society. For the hegemon, it is always difficult to respect or accept the rising status of other powers since such statuses are limited in number. Sometimes, the hegemon may have chosen a competition strategy to contain the rising power(s). In addition, to deny status to the rising power, the hegemon, together with other elite members, might also demonise the legitimacy of the rising powers’ status concerns and spread slandering labels to create the impression that they only deserve a downgraded status (Adler-Nissen, 2014, p. 143). A scenario in which the social creativity strategy prevails can help the rising power to bypass the geopolitical competition that is generally perceived as confrontational.

In the following sections, this article will examine the evolving relations between India and China since 2013. For some time, India is not willing to accept that China is now approaching a superpower status second only to the USA, and China is reluctant to recognise India as another rising power with nuclear capabilities. Their bitter history on territorial issues further complicates their interactions. It is encouraging to note that after the Doklam standoff, both governments are seeking ways to expand mutual accommodation. This article will try to bring scholarly attention to the breadth and quality of interactions between the two on various multilateral frameworks, thus excavating the implications of the building of trust and confidence in an evolving world of turbulence and uncertainty.

India on the Rise and Its Improved International Status

With increasing international recognition of India’s role and status, it seems that the hegemon has changed its position on India’s status concern from denial to recognition and acceptance, and such change of attitude on India’s status pursuit has paved the way, albeit an uneven one, for the warm-up of bilateral relations. In September 2008, the US government moved to secure an exemption for India from the rules banning civilian nuclear trade with any state that refused to accept IAEA comprehensive safeguards. India’s international status would have been significantly elevated by the move, but domestic resentment about the deal prevented the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh from taking the chance to enhance Indian relations with the USA (Malone, 2011, p. 55). Further delaying the warmup of India–USA relations was the Indian Parliament passing its version of liability law that went beyond existing practices to exempt the producer’s liability for nuclear damage due to accidents or related incidents (Pant, 2011, p. 8). Such hesitations to embrace the hegemon’s mobility strategy stood in the way of bilateral relations.

The fluctuation of Indo-US nuclear cooperation and bilateral relations largely persisted during the Obama presidency. Indian suspicions were supported when, in June 2011, the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) adopted new guidelines proposing to bar sensitive nuclear exports to non-NPT signatory countries, which had the potential to nullify the waiver awarded to India in 2008 (Varadarajan, 2011). This American attempt was resented by Indian officials, who worried that it would amount to a rollback of both the NSG waiver and the American
commitment to full civil nuclear cooperation with India. After some time, it became evident that Obama’s nuclear policy shift was more rhetorical than practical, enabling the high-priority recommencement of USA–India negotiations (Vanaik, 2015, p. 128). By warming its relations with India, the USA, as a matter of fact, made the commitment to elevate India to the role of strategic partner, provided India chose to accept such a role.

When Narendra Modi came to power in May 2014, the Obama administration decided to accept and talk to the newly elected BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party)-led NDA (National Democratic Alliance) government to discuss deeper strategic cooperation, leaving behind the unpleasant history it had with the former chief minister of Gujarat. During Obama’s trip to India in January 2015, both sides agreed to break the long-standing impasse on civilian nuclear cooperation. Obama used his executive powers to repel Congressional monitoring clauses on India’s nuclear materials and finalised the deal after India promised to remove obstacles against the entry of American companies (Parashar, 2015). Modi’s renewed gesture to embrace the American offer was certainly a break from his predecessors and BJP’s previous rigid positions, displaying his government’s willingness to circumvent existing obstacles to welcome American investment in India’s nuclear energy industry. While a single case does not necessarily indicate a thorough transition in its international behaviour, this case can be useful in observing India’s strategic stands on a series of international issues.

When Donald Trump came into power in 2017, he deepened American strategic relations with India and very quickly received Indian PM Modi at the White House in June 2017. Mr Trump further strengthened India’s strategic position when he officially released an Indo-Pacific concept in his first National Security Strategy, in which the USA for the first time labelled China a rival power, together with Russia and India, emerging as ‘as a leading global power and stronger strategic and defense partner’ (Trump, 2017). To observers, American compromise with India in the regime framework has extended beyond its traditional positions, but the policy return from the gesture proves that India has thus only compounded existing status rather than encouraged new (Kumar, 2014, p. 203). What is more than obvious is that the hegemon’s recognition of India as a ‘Major Defense Partner’ highlights the latter’s rising status and potential in helping contain another rising power.

Despite all the uncertainty, the American turn of attitude serves its interests and allows a first-mover advantage in competing for India’s support on major power competition against China’s rising momentum, a precious strategic asset in an era when the world power centre is shifting east. Nonetheless, the Trump administration’s changing positions and extreme strategies in major power politics have persuaded India that it is dealing with the most unpredictable president in American history.

In spite of increased strategic relations with the USA, India found itself absent on the exemption list of steel and aluminium tariffs the Trump administration imposed to protect American manufacturers in March 2018 (PTI, 2018, April 2). Moreover, it again found itself not on a renewed list of exempted states for the additional tariffs in May, a situation that forced India to announce potential tariff
retaliation measures against the USA in the (World Trade Organization) (Miles, 2018). Further alarming India about the danger of Trump’s unpredictability was the American listing of India on the observer list of currency manipulators (Nag, 2018).

All signs made India worry that American protectionism and unilateralism runs counter to its economic ideology. If American hegemony loses its control, Indian interest might be subject to the collateral damage, or worse, direct damage (Chaulia, 2018). It should be admitted that India was not the main target of American moves, but these actions represented a core aspect of the Trump economic doctrine to ‘put America first’, in which there is no place to level the field between developed and developing states, something that India both cherishes and needs to maintain its rising momentum. Generally, the relations between the USA (the hegemon) and India (the rising state) are more peaceful in nature when the hegemon largely adopts a mobility strategy in response to India’s status concerns.

What matters more to India is that White House’s increasingly unilateral moves make India economically and financially vulnerable to international fluctuations. Furthermore, the cost to accept the elevated status granted by the USA was high and might even result in a certain degree of policy autonomy loss, such as India being forced to suspend the import of Iranian oil and the purchase of Russia’s S-400 air defence system; the former is vital to its energy security (Parashar, 2018) and the latter for levelling the field of national defence vis-à-vis China. The interaction of major power relations has made India’s interaction with China more complicated, and the evolution of relations between the rising states of China and India can demonstrate how choices of status strategy can make a difference in their relations.

Evolution of Relations Between the Rising States of China and India

For a long time, China itself has been a status-seeking actor in both the bipolar and unipolar systems in which international affairs are dominated by superpowers. As an important reference country for India’s international ambition, China has taken a somewhat different path to great-power status, and, similar to what has happened with India, China’s international status is unstable and fluctuates with its relations with the dominant powers. Unlike India’s emphasis on nuclear elements in its great-power pursuit, China was already in the P5, an elite club for ‘nuclear haves’; instead, its status desires mainly dealt with economic elements since the history of economic deprivation had left its people with the bitterest of memories. The opening-up reforms since the late 1970s opened the door for China’s economic rise, yet today, international recognition did not come necessarily in tandem with its status as the second-largest economy and a rising military power. That recognition came in another way, when it was targeted by the USA as the state with most potential to challenge its superpowership.
As status-seeking states, both China and India tend to have positive views of themselves in international affairs but guard against further erosion of status. In such cases, they attempt to compensate for low feelings of international status by focusing on the build-up of national competence. The desired recognition, however, is not necessarily concomitant with the build-up of competence, since other states—especially a competing rising power—may either be slow to renew or reluctant to grant the recognition. Like India, China is also undergoing a transition from low to high status and must adjust its international behaviour to develop a strategy to favour its rising status. Unlike his predecessors, who favoured a keeping low profile (KLP) strategy, according to some scholars, President Xi Jinping has adopted the striving for achievement (SFA) strategy to create a more favourable environment for a rising China (Yan, 2014). With a new grand strategy, its strategy in dealing with India also requires a change.

In terms of nuclear politics, observers find that China’s long-time practice was to underplay India’s credentials as a nuclear weapons state (Horsburgh, 2015). However, unlike India’s perception about the threat of China, as Bajpai (2003, pp. 36–39) argued, India has never figured in China’s threat cosmology in any serious fashion. Noting the fact that as it rises, India is rising too, China needs a new strategy to deal with an increasingly capable India; the latter is now capable of causing substantial difficulties, if not of surpassing China in the short run. From a status perspective, both are adjusting their international behaviours, but such adaptations mainly focus on their relations with the hegemon.

With similar hesitation in policy shifts, India’s China policy after 2014 has continued to be heavily security-driven, and overt security concerns have led both states to make suboptimal choices to drive bilateral relations to new lows (Xie, 2015). Among many other things, no issue is more significant than India’s bid for Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) entry in driving India’s conviction that its rising status being blocked by China, even though several other countries also voted against its entry in a closed session in June 2016 (APP, 2016). China was blamed most by Indian strategists, and speculations in India went even further to claim the veto as part of China’s systemic strategy to contain India’s rise (Rajagopalan, 2016). Such an observation might have overestimated the differences between the two; moreover, the contrasting attitudes of China and the USA, in that the former is reluctant to accept India’s nuclear status, and the latter first partially accepted such status and now supports the full status of India in the international nuclear regime, has made India more suspicious of China’s India strategy (Pant & Biswas, 2018). When this strategy coincided with China’s unavoidable increase of influence on the subcontinent, India’s dissatisfaction intensified, and its reaction was also aggressive in nature.

It tends to bring the status-seekers into scenarios which might be prevailed by social competition strategies. Aggressive actions are likely to be taken to challenge the competing states. First, India expressed one of the first vocal and open objections to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China’s core initiative in boosting regional infrastructure. Whether or not China admits it, the BRI helps expand its influence on the subcontinent, and no country will feel the threat to its traditional sphere of influence more than India. India claimed that the China–Pakistan
Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key BRI project in the region, actually passed through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), a disputed area over which India claims sovereignty, and based on such, it boycotted the OBOR Summit held in Beijing in May 2017 (Blah, 2018). Bilateral differences were made open, further constraining bilateral relations. The social competition strategy tends to produce a scenario more confrontational in nature, especially when the rising status concerns are disrespected, demonised or even denied by other major powers. Under such circumstances, status-seekers could find themselves in a state of tension when two states are chasing the same seat in prestigious but impermeable elite groups. Their competition could become more confrontational in nature when one is blocking the entry of another into certain elite groups when it is already seated in that club. And the outburst of the Doklam standoff illustrated the peak of their confrontational status relations.

**Doklam Standoff as a Peak of Status-seeking Competition**

Doklam standoff occurred amidst a massive deficit of bilateral trust. The evidence to prove this event was in nature a status conflict lies in the fact that both states were guarding against further loss of status in the issue; India was expressing its strong dissatisfaction on China’s downplaying of its role in the region and China its anger over India’s abruptness in militarily intervening in the road construction. From the argument of competing status concerns, India was reluctant to admit China’s increased presence on the plateau and reacted with the aggressive gesture of initiating the standoff. It believed that inaction on China’s road construction attempt would make it look more vulnerable to Chinese presence in the region and taint the image of the rising status the Modi government had been working on since 2014. For the Chinese government, any retreat from Indian aggression could backfire and involved a high political cost.

Both sides miscalculated the danger into which competing status ambitions would drive them and the absence of strategic communications generated misperceptions from both sides and made the crisis last longer than expected. Some strategists in India believed that China would back down because it preferred quieter and more peaceful relations with India as it prioritised an ambitious BRI globally and attempted to build up its image as a responsible leading state in international politics (Dutta, 2017). Indian intelligence branches also made positive assumptions that the Chinese government would not want a war and would eventually agree to Indian terms (Pandit, 2017). Therefore, initially, there was optimism among the Indian media and government officials that there was only a slim chance of the standoff escalating, especially when China’s attention was also tied up at the eastern front, where the USA and its allies were mounting pressures on China’s South China Sea claims.

China, as a rising superpower, was surprised to be caught in a military standoff when it would have expected a protest, if anything, from Bhutan, whereas it believed
India was not a disputing party (Fravel, 2017, p. 14). An agitated Chinese government decided to adopt comprehensive bargaining strategies to bring India to its terms, including media warfare, both domestic and international, to publicise how provocative Indian behaviour was and how determinedly it would hold its position. When China announced that the Indian side should withdraw its personnel first before any substantial negotiation could take place, the pressure to initiate negotiation was passed onto India, who would have to act first if a negotiated solution were ever desired. There was no easy way out. A classic route for escalating a crisis by misperceptions is that neither side believes the crisis will lead to war, and they hence choose strategies of playing toughness. Under such circumstances, one side or both sides tend to adopt a strategy of brinkmanship to display military strength as a way of generating and demonstrating domestic audience costs, actions which can lead to escalation (Fearon, 1997). Ways to eliminate spiralling escalation include at least one side realising that a war could happen if the crisis is sustained or one party refraining from using brinkmanship policy.

The Indian government demonstrated a willingness to talk by repeatedly requesting to send envoys to Beijing and negotiate a solution that could be accepted by both sides. From July 26 to 28, Ajit Kumar Doval, India’s National Security Advisor (NSA), went to Beijing to attend the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) NSA meeting in Beijing, and he was received by the Chinese president before he left for Delhi. This action was taken as a positive sign from the Chinese government. On 2 August the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of People’s Republic of China, 2017, August 2) released a document confirming that the number of Indian border troops at the standoff site had been reduced from over 400 people at one point to 40 as of the end of July. When asked to confirm the Chinese statement about the reduced number of Indian personnel at the site, the then Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Gopal Baglay declined to give details and quoted it as ‘an operational matter’ beyond his knowledge (PTI, 2017, August 4). Regardless of might have happened behind closed doors during Mr Doval’s visit, India’s gesture of reducing personnel at the site and the revived meetings of high-ranking officials between the two states indicated that the channel for strategic communication had been reopened, and the crisis passed its peak.

On 28 August the Chinese government announced that ‘the Indian side withdrew all its border personnel and equipment that were illegally on the Chinese territory to the Indian side (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of People’s Republic of China, 2017, August 28). It also stressed that the Chinese personnel onsite have verified this situation’, indicating a time sequence of actions, while the Indian government confirmed that there was an ongoing ‘expeditious disengagement of border personnel of India and China at the face-off site at Doklam’ (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2017a, August 28). This action meant that the stand-off had been eventually resolved in an amicable way. The different interpretations from both sides indicated that they might have reached a sort of consensus in which each could interpret the standoff outcomes in their own way and would not challenge each other’s version (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2017b, August 28). The peaceful resolution paved the way for more flexible handling of their relations.
As observers have predicted, their relations had hit a historical low after the standoff. The best outcome of this worst situation was that both sides began to realise the importance of strategic communications, the lack of which could bring their relations into a dangerous scenario that neither side could afford to encounter again. Both states are status-seekers, and there is fierce competition for high status, but another open confrontation as such is certainly in the interest of neither. The crisis bargaining process helped both governments to test each other’s strategic determination in guarding against loss of status, and a zero-sum mindset could only come from their persistent misperception of each other’s strategic goals.

India–China Rapprochement Amidst Frequent Leadership Meetings

A peaceful resolution to the faceoff paved the way for a side-line meeting between Indian and Chinese leaders during the BRICS Summit in September 2017, at which they both expressed the strong desire to ‘seek common ground while shelving differences’ and ‘not let differences become disputes’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of People’s Republic of China, 2017, September 5; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2017, September 5). The meeting and their respective remarks would help to avoid clashes to preserve the foundation for a relationship without open conflicts, at least, but more was needed to enhance their relations. There would be no real peace between the two countries unless the leaders displayed sufficient political leadership to solve border disputes (Joshi, 2018). But before that can happen, both leaders need first to bring bilateral relations back to normal.

The informal summit that took place in April 2018 showed the importance for both leaders to return to bilateral dialogue and communications to avoid clashes, and both were keen to de-link border disputes from broader relations to avoid the interference of temporary differences on bilateral stability and cooperation (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2018, April 28). Both leaders highlighted the importance of strategic communication in alleviating hostile sentiment and generating an atmosphere for a rapprochement amidst which strategies of social creativity were applied, such as working on new international institutions, preserving and promoting norms on multilateralism rather than unilateralism and engaging in new ‘China–India plus’ diplomatic initiatives to facilitate bilateral cooperation.

As a gesture of goodwill, the Indian government cancelled the Asian Security Conference to be held by the Institute of Defence and Studies and Analysis (IDSA) to constrain any possible anti-China rhetoric, and it also instructed the Dalai Lama to change the venue of several functions (Dutta, 2018, March 16). From a status perspective, India showed its recognition of China’s increased status as a major power whose core interests should be respected. The subsequent exchange visits of high-ranking officials demonstrated China’s positive reply to India’s gestures and recognition of the importance of Indian policy in its general grand strategy. As a matter of fact, positive signs had been exchanged to soothe their strained relationship even before the Wuhan informal summit, when the revival of visits
between high-ranking officials indicated the eagerness of both states to re-establish positive ties. Such mutual recognitions were also reflected in a total of five occasions of leadership meetings in 2018, and both leaders continued to work on strengthening strategic communication and incorporating positive content in bilateral relations.

In the second half of 2018, it became clearer that a rapprochement was on the way after a year of turbulence in China–India relations. The level of mutual trust was improved when the Indian government defended its handling of the Doklam issue; for instance, on at least two occasions, its Minister of External Affairs responded to and rejected the media speculation that the status at the faceoff site might have changed (TNN, 2018, May 29; TNN, 2018, August 2). The statement from the Indian prime minister lent even greater weight to the positive changes of its China policy when Mr Modi (2018) denied international speculation that India might be at the core of an Indo-Pacific squad of states to contain China at a keynote speech on the Shangri-La Dialogue. In the speech, he further elaborated that his government’s international strategy does not view the Indo-Pacific region as a strategy or ‘a club of limited members’, that there is no such ‘grouping that seeks to dominate’, nor ‘do we consider it as directed against any country... India’s vision for the Indo-Pacific Region is, therefore, a positive one’. Such remarks showed India’s nuanced change regarding status competition in the region.

If there is at least one consensus between India and China, it should be their mutual understanding that their relations would prominently define the Asian Century and substantially impact global politics. This potential was made clear even before the Doklam standoff, when Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that ‘If China and India speak with one voice, the whole world will listen’ (Xinhua News Agency, 2014) and a delayed response from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2018, June 1) echoed a similar sentiment: ‘Asia and the world will have a better future when India and China work together in trust and confidence’. With the sheer size of population, territory and economy combined, their coordination and cooperation in global debates can effectively help to amplify the common voices of the global South and safeguard a fairer and more equitable world order, therefore contributing tremendously to the world’s stability and prosperity. More moves based on social creativity strategy are to come.

**An Indirect Path for Cooperation Between India and China**

Returning to the relations between the two countries, China and India actually share a history of cooperation in many multilateral frameworks. Therefore, particular attention should be paid to the fact that their engagement in these multilateral frameworks was not side-lined by their differences. India has acceded to the expanded Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank, which China promoted and headquartered in Shanghai, China (Sridharan, 2017). These are important platforms through which developing countries can display solidarity
and a common agenda and can be seen as typical products of the social mobility strategy by which China actually accepted India as a core player in both regimes and India agreed to cooperate. For now, China and India are the first- and second-largest shareholders of AIIB, a multilateral development bank to boost regional infrastructure investment.

Equal attentions, however, should be given to what their worsening relations before the Doklam standoff has displayed, the relations between status-seeking states are complicated when both the hegemon and a rising power is competing for the support from another rising power by using social mobility strategy. The interactions between India and China thus hold particular implications for the status perspective, at a time when the USA, the dominant power, is taking initiatives in revising international institutions it established. Amid resurgent waves of unilateralism, multilateralism is now under stress. The UK is rigorously seeking Brexit, and the USA is making extra efforts to attack and withdraw from international institutions. Against this tide of declining trust in multipolarity, China and India, the two largest developing countries, decided to strengthen their cooperation.

Instead of indulging in status competition, India and China are actually trying to view each other in terms of opportunity and trust. During his speech at the SCO Summit in June 2018, PM Modi stressed that connectivity with neighbouring nations and in the SCO region would be the top priority of his government (Press Trust of India, PTI, 2018, June 10). There are signs that India has fit its deeds to its words, such as when it declined to invite Australia to join the Malabar 2018 exercises and stressed that there was ‘no need to give [a] military angle to the Quad’ (Hindustan Times, HT Correspondent, 2018). Furthermore, there has been more room for both sides to test constructive interactions in other multilateral frameworks such as the BIMSTEC (the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), SAARC (the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and BRI initiatives. However, their cooperation under existing multilateral frameworks can be generally categorised as their choice of measures under social mobility strategies toward each other, either China takes India into the elite clubs it plays a leading role or India recognises China’s concerns on certain issues. More moves are needed if both states want to keep the current rapprochement momentum sustainable. The undergoing China–India plus has a potential in playing such a role by driving their relations into a scenario that might be prevailed by social creativity strategies by both sides.

The relations between status-seeking states could be more creative and peaceful when they adopt a strategy of social creativity in handling relations with the other, for instance they can work together to establish new institutions that offer an alternative to the existing ones dominated by the hegemon (Larson, 2017). What might influence the direction of their relations is the nature of such alternative and whether these institutions’ being inclusive might help to garner more support for rising powers from other major powers. In more preferred cases, rising powers can work together to construct new institutions that reflect their shared concerns and interests. This process requires a certain level of mutual trust and strategic communication between status-seeking states, especially when the dominant
power adopts a division strategy to pick status-seeking states to compete against each other.

As a sign of positive interaction, China offered to cooperate with India to help a third country improve its infrastructure, which India accepted. For instance, the Chinese president’s visit to Rwanda coincided with the Indian PM’s African trip, and their stay in Rwanda overlapped, which indicated to observers that prior coordination might have taken place. This assumption was subsequently confirmed by the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson of China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of People’s Republic of China, 2018, July 24), who also made it clear that the two leaders are vigorously exploring “‘China–India plus one’ or “China–India plus X” cooperation model to achieve mutual benefits and win-win outcomes’. This approach would mean that, after a difficult period of bilateral relations, China and India are finding themselves on the same page on many issues (PTI, 2018, July 24). As mentioned earlier in this article, when status-seekers adopt social creativity strategies, their relations can be more peaceful since they are able to seek and establish together alternative status to geopolitical dominance, and new institutions of cooperation can further alleviate their competition for status.

The Indian foreign minister made clear that it could work with China on infrastructure projects in Afghanistan and that such cooperation would not be affected by Pakistani factors (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2018, May 28). After this statement, India and China also jointly held training programmes for Afghanistan diplomats, expanding the ‘India–China plus’ concept to broader practice (TNN, 2018, October 16). To some extent, such coordination represents their attempts to advocate a new multilateral mode of cooperation, a key element for implementing social creativity strategy. While the pace is cautious, progress is on the way; for example, both are considering practical cooperation to help railway construction projects that the Nepali government has long sought to improve its domestic and international connectivity (Bhaya, 2018), and based on this idea, the Indian government has revealed its intention to offer northeastern access to China in a BRI strategic shift and is considering allowing Chinese companies to participate in India’s northeast connectivity plan (Dasgupta, 2018). These movements can be taken as significant gestures of goodwill from India, since it is attempting to include China in BBIN initiatives, its sub-regional grouping connectivity mechanism involving Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal, which is widely regarded as a counter-initiative to China’s BRI (Blah, 2018). Such coordination indicates that India is responding to China’s social mobility and creativity strategies with the similar.

Thanks to the driving force by their new attempts to cooperate, Indian government demonstrates nuanced changes in its attitude towards regional connectivity, and its position has approached nearer to the concept of China’s BRI to boost regional infrastructure. The obstacles ahead are twofold. India is concerned that it might be side-lined or even marginalised due to its strength disadvantage vis-à-vis China. In other words, India worries that it might play a secondary role in joint projects in a third country, since China can always prevail over India by providing better terms or services, and their cooperative project would thus eventually be dominated by
China. With such being the case, it is important for China to respond by negotiating with India an inclusive cooperation model before extending it to more countries, only then the vision of high mutual trust and their collective rise in the region can be truly entertained.

Concluding Remarks

From a realist perspective, the existing literature tends to argue that factors such as geographic positions, relative size of national capability, and a history of conflict would create a zero-sum game between rising powers. As briefly demonstrated in this article, research applying the social status theory to study the relations between status-seeking states such as India and China notes that status seeking does lead to conflicts when their status ambition clashes, but the analysis in this article also shows that with proper identity management strategies, such as social mobility and creativity strategies, their competitive sentiment can be alleviated and their strategic communications improved. There are creative ways for status-seekers to find paths for cooperation amidst a pessimistic and hostile international atmosphere, and their achievement of higher status does not solely rely on gaining relative military advantages and suppressing the status pursuit of other powers. The importance of strategic communications between states is highlighted in this article. Rising powers can actually communicate their concerns, and they can employ mechanisms to build up confidence and generate mutual trust in each other’s international behaviour or find ways that they can actually join hands to face a more powerful hegemon.

The India–China rapprochement comes at a timely way when the declining momentum of an Americanised global order is shaping a less-West centric international order and showcasing a trend of regionalisation of international politics (Tang, 2019). Despite so, their differences in struggling for status recognition still remain. China is now heading for higher recognition of a great-power status, and its main reference country is the USA, since they are now popularly considered as the two strongest states in the international system. China’s international status can be partially reflected in the fact that it now is taken as the most serious challenger to the US supremacy. For Indian strategists, the main reference country for its rising status is China, and it would take more seriously Chinese recognition of its rising status; moreover, any Chinese attempt to downplay its international role might invite an aggressive reaction from India. Creative strategies are being pursued by leaders from both countries, and concrete steps are now being taken.

It should be stressed that this project does not attempt to supplant realism but to supplement it. The theory of the project implies that the states may react to international constraints and incentives, but it also enables the idea that the policies and actions of states are also shaped by their conditions (Waltz, 1997, p. 124). And this is a theory for rising powers only and cautions are required when it is implied to middle and small states. Status-seeking motives stressed here in the project do not exclude the domestic and security concerns accompanying the
process. First, international status is based on the goods valued by international and domestic societies, and the subgroups in the state have multiple traits based on which the country can be evaluated. The domestic conditions also influence how the country prefers its status concerns to be respected by others. Second, a society’s security conception is closely linked with its perception about its international role, and a higher status enables a higher sense of security and more means to influence others to enhance security. With rising status and capabilities, the state is expected to acquire higher status, at the level of which its international behaviour is expected to be more predictable and thus contribute to regional stability and prosperity.

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