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Dragon's Shadow: China's India Policy

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Abstract

The bilateral relationship between China and India, two major emerging powers, is characterized by a complex mix of cooperation and competition. This paper critically examines their reciprocal policies, focusing on strategic objectives, diplomatic engagements, economic interactions, and military posturing within the framework of regional geopolitics and global dynamics. China adopts a dual strategy of containment and engagement, leveraging its ties with Pakistan and asserting dominance along disputed borders to counter India's growing alignment with Western powers through initiatives like the Quad. In contrast, India prioritizes safeguarding territorial integrity, enhancing regional influence, and reducing economic dependence on China following tensions such as the 2020 Galwan Valley clash. Both nations balance rivalry with pragmatic collaboration, yet unresolved border disputes and geopolitical rivalries pose significant risks to stability. The paper underscores the need for sustained dialogue, confidence-building measures, and risk management to navigate this intricate relationship. Drawing on primary sources and theoretical analysis, the study concludes that the trajectory of Sino-Indian relations will have profound implications for regional stability and the global geopolitical order.

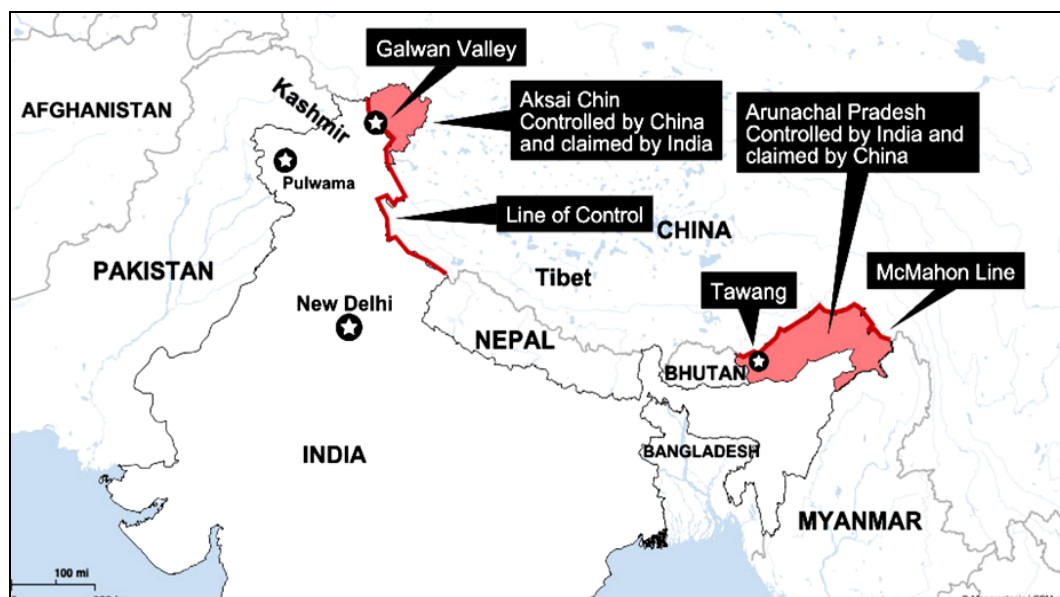
Keywords: China-India relations, foreign policy, border disputes, strategic competition, geopolitics.

Introduction

Temporal Scaffolding

The histories of India and China are vast, intricate, and deeply intertwined. Both civilizations have ancient roots that stretch back thousands of years, and their interactions over time—

whether through trade, cultural exchange, military confrontations, or religious influences—have shaped the course of Asian and global history. Below is an exploration of the relationship between India and China concerning culture, trade, and military aspects.



Source: <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/2024/02/22/india-china-border-talks-end-with-a-positive-vibe-but-no-substantive-outcomes/>

Fig 1: India-China Boundary Map.

India and China have shared a rich history of cultural exchange, particularly in the realms of religion, philosophy, art, and literature. One of the most significant cultural exchanges between India and China was the transmission of Buddhism from India to China. Indian missionaries and scholars travelled to China via the Silk Road, bringing Buddhist scriptures, art, and ideas. Key figures like Faxian, Xuanzang, and Yijing travelled from China to India to study Buddhism and bring back sacred texts and relics. Buddhism profoundly influenced Chinese philosophy, art, architecture, and even governance. It merged with indigenous Chinese philosophies like Confucianism and Daoism, creating unique schools such as Chan (Zen) Buddhism. Additionally, Chinese pilgrims brought innovations like papermaking back to India. Indian artistic styles, particularly those associated with Buddhist stupas and temples, influenced Chinese temple architecture and sculpture. Indian epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* indirectly influenced Chinese storytelling traditions, often mediated through Buddhist narratives. Indian systems of astrology, medicine (Ayurveda), and mathematics reached China through Buddhist monks and traders. While Confucianism and Hinduism remained distinct, there were points of philosophical convergence, especially in discussions about ethics, governance, and the nature of reality. Some scholars suggest that Tantric practices from India may have influenced certain aspects of Daoist rituals and mysticism. (Ziyu, 2019)

Trade has been a cornerstone of India-China relations for millennia, facilitated by the Silk Road and maritime routes. The Silk Road connected India and China, enabling the exchange of goods such as silk, spices, precious stones, and textiles. Indian exports like spices (especially pepper), cotton textiles, gemstones, and ivory were highly valued in China, while Chinese silk, porcelain, and tea were prized in India. Merchants, monks, and travellers acted as cultural ambassadors, spreading ideas alongside goods. By the early centuries CE, maritime trade routes across the Indian Ocean became increasingly important. Ports like Tamralipti in Bengal and Guangzhou in China served as hubs. Indian spices, particularly black pepper, were central to this trade network, while Chinese silk dominated exports. Knowledge of monsoon wind patterns allowed ships to travel efficiently between India and China. Trade fostered the growth of cities along both coasts and inland regions, and innovations like papermaking, printing, and metallurgy spread between the two regions. (Britannica, 2025, March 17) ^[18]

While cultural and trade ties were generally peaceful, military interactions between India and China were sporadic but significant. Nomadic groups like the Hunas (Huns) and Xiongnu posed threats to both empires, forcing them to adopt defensive strategies. The Kushans, who ruled parts of northern India and Central Asia, maintained diplomatic and military relations with Han China, leading to stability rather than conflict. During the reign of Emperor Harshavardhana in the 7th century CE, India and China had cordial relations, partly due to the efforts of Chinese traveller Xuanzang, who visited India during this time. However, regional powers occasionally clashed over control of trade routes in Central Asia. During the colonial era, British India and Qing China had limited direct military engagement, though the British East India Company competed with China over the opium trade, culminating in the Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860). A major turning point in modern India-China relations was the brief but intense border war in 1962, which arose from disputes over territories like Aksai Chin and Arunachal

Pradesh. The war strained relations and left a legacy of mistrust. Post-1962, tensions have persisted over unresolved border issues, including clashes in Doklam (2017) and Galwan Valley (2020). Both nations have invested heavily in defence capabilities, leading to an arms race in South Asia. (Tourangbam, 2020)

The history of India and China is a fascinating narrative of two ancient civilizations that have interacted, influenced, and sometimes clashed over millennia. Their relationship spans various historical periods, including antiquity, the geopolitical view, the Middle Ages, Tamil dynasties, Tang and Harsha dynasties, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, the Sino-Sikh War, and the British Raj.

In antiquity, both India and China had flourishing ancient civilizations—the Indus Valley Civilization (circa 2600-1900 BCE) in India and the Shang Dynasty (circa 1600-1046 BCE) in China. While there is no direct evidence of contact between these early cultures, trade routes developed later facilitated indirect exchanges. By the 1st millennium BCE, the Silk Road began connecting Central Asia, India, and China, laying the foundation for future interactions in trade, culture, and diplomacy. Geopolitically, the Himalayas acted as both a natural barrier and a bridge between the two regions. Passes like Nathu La and Shipki La facilitated trade and cultural exchange. Both civilizations recognized the strategic importance of Central Asia as a buffer zone and a hub for trade, with control over this region often determining the balance of power between India and China.

During the Middle Ages, significant interactions occurred through the Tamil dynasties and the Tang-Harsha diplomacy. The Chola Dynasty (9th-13th centuries) was a major maritime power in South India. Under rulers like Rajaraja Chola, I and Rajendra Chola I, the Cholas expanded their influence to Southeast Asia, indirectly influencing China's southern neighbours. Tamil traders brought Indian goods, ideas, and religious practices to ports like Guangzhou in China, spreading Buddhism and Hinduism. In northern India, Emperor Harshavardhana ruled much of the region during the 7th century, coinciding with the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) in China. The Chinese monk Xuanzang visited India during Harsha's rule, documenting Indian culture, religion, and governance. His writings provide valuable insights into the era. Harsha and the Tang emperor maintained cordial relations, exchanging gifts and envoys, though regional powers occasionally clashed over control of trade routes. (YUAN, 2015)

The Yuan Dynasty under Kublai Khan (1215-1294) marked another phase of interaction. The Mongols expanded their influence across Asia, facilitating trade along the Silk Road, which benefited both India and China. While the Mongols did not directly invade India, their campaigns in Central Asia impacted Indian kingdoms, particularly the Delhi Sultanate. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Admiral Zheng He led seven major naval expeditions across the Indian Ocean, reaching as far as Calicut (Kozhikode) in South India. These voyages strengthened trade ties and established diplomatic relations between Ming China and Indian kingdoms. Zheng He's expeditions introduced Chinese goods, art, and technology to India, while Indian spices and textiles were highly valued in China. (World Civilisation)

During the British Raj (1858-1947), India and China were drawn into the dynamics of colonial rivalry. The British viewed China as both a competitor and a market, exploiting its resources and expanding trade, often using India as a base. Indian-grown opium played a central role in the triangular

trade between Britain, India, and China, fuelling economic exploitation and social problems in China. The geopolitical rivalry between Britain and Russia, known as the "Great Game," extended into Central Asia, where both powers sought to counter Chinese and Indian influences.

In conclusion, the historical relationship between India and China spans thousands of years, characterized by a complex interplay of cooperation and competition. Cultural exchanges, particularly through Buddhism, created enduring links between the two civilizations, serving as a major cultural bridge. Trade flourished via the Silk Road and maritime routes, enriching both societies economically and technologically. From the Tamil dynasties and Tang-Harsha diplomacy to Zheng He's voyages and the opium trade during the British Raj, these interactions significantly shaped the geopolitics of Asia. Military engagements, ranging from ancient stability to modern border disputes, have marked periods of tension and conflict, including key events like the Sino-Sikh War and the Opium Wars. Despite challenges, the shared history of these two ancient giants continues to influence their present-day relationship, reflecting a dynamic interplay of cultural, trade, and military connections across antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times. Key milestones such as the spread of Buddhism, Tamil-Chinese trade, Tang-Harsha diplomacy, Zheng He's expeditions, and the geopolitical dynamics of colonial and post-colonial eras underscore the profound impact of this relationship on the global stage.

In the academic article "India-China Relations: The Border Issue and Beyond", the scholar, (Jain, 24 Jan 2007) provides a detailed analysis of the historical and contemporary dynamics of India-China relations. The scholar delves into the complexities of the bilateral relationship, focusing on the longstanding border disputes and their broader implications for regional and global politics. Mansingh examines how historical ties, including ancient cultural and religious exchanges, have shaped interactions between the two nations, while also addressing the modern challenges that have emerged since the mid-20th century.

The scholar discusses key events such as the 1962 Sino-Indian War, which marked a turning point in the relationship, and analyzes how unresolved border issues along regions like Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh continue to hinder mutual trust. Mansingh also highlights efforts at rapprochement, including diplomatic dialogues and economic cooperation, while emphasizing the strategic competition between India and China in South Asia and beyond. The article underscores how the interplay of economic interdependence, geopolitical rivalry, and multilateral engagements shapes the evolving dynamics of India-China relations, offering insights into both the obstacles and opportunities for future collaboration.

China's India Policy

China's India policy has evolved significantly since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. This evolution can be divided into distinct phases, each shaped by historical events, geopolitical imperatives, and strategic calculations. The analysis below synthesizes the key developments in China's approach toward India over the decades.

Phase 1: 1949-1965-Strategic Alignment and Subordination

- **Initial Engagement:** In the early years after its founding, China sought to engage with India within the broader framework of its relations with great powers like the United States and the Soviet Union. Jawaharlal Nehru's

correspondence with Mao Zedong and his visit to China in 1939 laid the groundwork for initial goodwill.

- **Shifting Perceptions:** By 1954, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) viewed India as subordinate due to its incomplete revolution and lack of ideological alignment. Beijing perceived India as unequal and unworthy of being treated as an autonomous actor in global affairs.
- **Key Objectives:**
 - i). Deter India from aligning with the United States.
 - ii). Leverage India's position in the Global South to foster "Asian solidarity" and counter U.S. influence in Asia.
- **Outcome:** While there were moments of cooperation, such as the Panchsheel Agreement (1954), underlying mistrust culminated in the 1962 border war, which solidified mutual distrust.

Phase 2: 1965-1988-Cultural Revolution and Stalemate

- **Cultural Revolution Impact:** During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), China's focus on internal turmoil relegated India-China relations to the back burner.
- **Mao's Overture:** In 1970, Mao Zedong signalled a desire to improve relations, calling India a "great country" and expressing hope for reconciliation. However, geopolitical developments, such as India's 1971 Treaty of Peace and Friendship with the Soviet Union and the Bangladesh crisis, stalled progress.
- **Deng Xiaoping's Proposal:** After Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping proposed a "package deal" to resolve the border dispute in 1981. However, India's adherence to its territorial claims and China's reluctance to compromise prevented the realization of this proposal.
- **Pakistan Factor:** China continued to deepen its strategic alliance with Pakistan, providing military, nuclear, and economic support to counterbalance India's regional influence.
- **Outcome:** Relations remained strained, punctuated by periodic escalations, such as the Sumdorongchu Valley intrusion in 1986. However, Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 visit marked the beginning of normalization.

Phase 3: Post-Cold War Era-Strategic Ambiguity and Risk Management

- **Cold War Aftermath:** The collapse of European communism and China's isolation following the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident prompted Beijing to stabilize its borders and improve ties with neighbouring countries, including India.
- **Economic Focus:** Both nations prioritized economic development, creating space for improved relations. Agreements like the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement (1993) and Confidence Building Measures (1996) aimed to reduce tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC).
- **Strategic Calculations**
 - i). China viewed India as significant primarily in the context of its relations with the United States.
 - ii). Beijing sought to keep India neutral during global turbulence, emphasizing the "Asian Century."
- **Limited Engagement:** Despite some progress, China maintained its stance on key issues, such as opposing India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG)

and the UN Security Council, while continuing to support Pakistan strategically.

- **Outcome:** The relationship remained transactional, with China engaging India only when it perceived existential threats or geopolitical risks.

Phase 4: 21st Century-Assertiveness and Competition

- **Rising Tensions:** Since the early 2000s, China's growing assertiveness in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific has heightened competition with India. Initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), have been perceived by India as encirclement strategies.
- **Military Posturing:** Incidents like the Doklam standoff (2017) and the Galwan Valley clash (2020) underscored China's use of coercive tactics to assert dominance along the LAC.
- **India's Response:** India adopted a more assertive stance, strengthening its military capabilities, deepening strategic partnerships (e.g., Quad), and pursuing economic self-reliance through initiatives like "Atmanirbhar Bharat."
- **Outcome:** The relationship has become increasingly competitive, with both nations balancing rivalry and pragmatic collaboration.

Key Drivers of China's India Policy across Phases

- Great Power Dynamics:** China consistently subordinated its India policy to its relations with the U.S. and Russia.
- Border Disputes:** Persistent tensions along the LAC have been a recurring feature of bilateral relations.
- Pakistan Factor:** China's strategic alliance with Pakistan has been a constant tool to counterbalance India.
- Status Rivalry:** Beijing's perception of India as an unequal competitor has shaped its approach, reflecting power asymmetry and status concerns.

Objectives

China's India policy is shaped by a combination of strategic, economic, and geopolitical objectives aimed at maintaining stability in South Asia while countering India's rise as a regional and global power. A key goal is to prevent India from dominating South Asia, which could challenge China's influence in the region. To achieve this, China strengthens ties with India's neighbours, such as Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, through infrastructure investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and military cooperation. Additionally, managing the long-standing border disputes along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) is critical to avoid large-scale conflict, even as China asserts its territorial claims through diplomatic dialogues and periodic military pressure. By balancing engagement and deterrence, China seeks to maintain strategic equilibrium in the region.

Economically and geopolitically, China aims to leverage bilateral trade and multipolar frameworks to foster interdependence while ensuring it retains the upper hand. The trade relationship is heavily tilted in China's favour, enabling it to wield economic leverage over India. At the same time, China works to dilute India's growing partnerships with Western powers, particularly the U.S., by emphasizing shared interests in platforms like BRICS, SCO, and RIC. It also seeks to secure access to the Indian Ocean, vital for its energy imports and maritime trade, by developing ports and naval facilities in countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This dual approach of cooperation and competition reflects China's

efforts to limit India's global aspirations while promoting a multipolar world order that reduces Western dominance. (Rekhi, 2024) ^[13]

Cultural diplomacy and soft power play a supplementary role in China's strategy, aiming to reshape negative perceptions among the Indian public and policymakers. Through cultural exchanges, educational scholarships, and media narratives, China seeks to build goodwill and highlight its development model as a potential template for India. However, underlying tensions persist due to historical conflicts, unresolved border issues, and India's alignment with Western-led initiatives like the Quad. Thus, China's India policy reflects a delicate balancing act, where cooperation in areas like climate change and global governance coexists with fierce competition for influence in South Asia and beyond. This dynamic underscores the complexity of Sino-Indian relations in an increasingly multipolar world. (Syed Hasanat Shah, 26 April 2017).

Diplomatic Engagements

The scholar (Mukherjee, 03 Feb 2010) ^[10] talks about how China's India policy has been significantly shaped by unresolved border disputes and the strategic competition between the two nations. They highlight that China often leverages territorial issues to maintain consistent pressure on India, using these disputes as a tool to assert dominance and control along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This approach not only reflects Beijing's intent to keep India strategically off-balance but also underscores the centrality of border tensions in shaping the overall bilateral relationship. By employing coercive tactics that fall short of outright military conflict, China has managed to exert considerable influence while avoiding large-scale escalation.

In addition, the scholars emphasize China's use of Pakistan as a strategic ally to counterbalance India's influence in South Asia. Beijing's extensive military and nuclear cooperation with Islamabad serves as a critical component of its regional strategy, aimed at keeping New Delhi in check. This alliance is not merely a reflection of shared interests between China and Pakistan but also a calculated move by Beijing to project power in South Asia and limit India's ability to dominate the region. The study situates this policy within the broader geopolitical context, where China views its ties with India as subordinate to its relationships with major powers like the United States and Russia.

The relevance of this analysis to China's India policy lies in its comprehensive examination of Beijing's motivations and strategies. It provides valuable insights into how China seeks regional dominance by maintaining strategic leverage through territorial disputes and alliances, particularly with Pakistan. By framing China's approach within the larger framework of great power relations, the source highlights the asymmetry in how Beijing prioritizes its engagements—treating India as a secondary player compared to its interactions with the U.S. and Russia. This perspective is crucial for understanding the structural dynamics of Sino-Indian relations and the challenges India faces in navigating this complex relationship. Carla P. Freeman (Freeman, 19 Dec 2017) ^[3] delves into the dual nature of China's India policy, which combines economic engagement with strategic rivalry. The study highlights the paradoxical coexistence of growing trade ties between China and India alongside deep-seated geopolitical mistrust. While economic interdependence has expanded significantly, with bilateral trade reaching substantial levels, this has not translated into improved political or strategic

relations. Instead, the underlying tensions, driven by unresolved border disputes and regional competition, continue to overshadow the potential for deeper cooperation. This duality underscores Beijing's strategy of leveraging economic tools to maintain a semblance of stability while simultaneously pursuing policies that counterbalance India's rise on the global stage.

The author also examines China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as a reflection of Beijing's efforts to expand its regional influence at India's expense. These infrastructure projects are perceived by India as an encirclement strategy, aimed at strengthening China's foothold in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. By investing heavily in Pakistan and other neighbouring countries, China seeks to project power and limit India's ability to dominate the region. This approach not only exacerbates existing mistrust but also reinforces India's concerns about China's long-term strategic intentions. The author argues that such initiatives, while framed as economic development programs, serve broader geopolitical objectives that complicate Sino-Indian relations.

Finally, the author analyzes China's behaviour in multilateral platforms like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where it attempts to balance cooperation with India while advancing its own interests. In these forums, China often adopts a pragmatic approach, emphasizing areas of mutual benefit while downplaying contentious issues. However, this balancing act does not eliminate the underlying strategic competition between the two nations. The relevance of this analysis to China's India policy lies in its emphasis on how Beijing uses economic tools, regional infrastructure projects, and multilateral diplomacy to manage its relationship with India. By projecting power through initiatives like the BRI and engaging in multilateral dialogue, China seeks to maintain leverage over India while avoiding outright confrontation. This nuanced approach reflects the complexity of Sino-Indian relations, where cooperation and competition coexist uneasily.

The synthesis of China's India policy, (Wojczewski, 12 Feb 2016) ^[19] reveals a consistent historical pattern since 1949, where China has treated India as a subordinate actor within the international system. This approach is deeply rooted in Beijing's prioritization of its relationships with great powers such as the United States and Russia, often relegating India to a secondary status in its foreign policy calculus. Persistent border disputes and China's strategic alignment with Pakistan have remained enduring elements of this policy, serving as tools to maintain pressure on India. The border issue, in particular, has been a recurring flashpoint, with China employing coercive strategies such as military posturing and infrastructure development along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) to assert dominance. These actions reflect Beijing's perception of India as an unequal competitor for security and status in the global arena, a view that has shaped the trajectory of Sino-Indian relations over decades.

China's India policy can be characterized by a dual strategy of containment and engagement, balancing rivalry with pragmatic collaboration. On the one hand, Beijing employs coercive tactics to contain India's rise, including military deployments near disputed borders and deepening ties with India's neighbours through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These efforts aim to project regional influence and counterbalance India's growing stature in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific. On the other hand, China engages with India economically and diplomatically to manage

tensions and avoid escalation, particularly in multilateral forums like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This dual approach underscores the complexity of Sino-Indian relations, where economic interdependence coexists with geopolitical mistrust, reflecting Beijing's broader strategic imperatives.

The regional and global dimensions of China's India policy further highlight the structural and psychological drivers of this relationship. Regionally, China seeks to dominate South Asia by leveraging its alliances with countries like Pakistan and expanding its presence through infrastructure projects under the BRI. Globally, Beijing views India's growing alignment with the United States, particularly under frameworks like the Quad, as a direct challenge to its ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. This perception fuels Beijing's anxieties about India's potential to serve as a counterweight to its regional hegemony. While China's approach is unlikely to undergo significant change in the short term due to its entrenched power asymmetry and status rivalry, India can influence this dynamic by enhancing its economic, military, and diplomatic capabilities. Such efforts would not only address the imbalance but also provide India with greater leverage to shape Beijing's strategic calculus in the long term.

Economic Interaction

- i). **Trade Relations and Imbalances:** A significant aspect of Sino-Indian economic interaction is their bilateral trade relationship, which has grown substantially over the past two decades. However, this relationship is marked by a persistent trade imbalance favouring China. India imports far more from China than it exports, with Chinese goods dominating sectors like electronics, machinery, and pharmaceutical raw materials. This imbalance has been a source of concern for India, particularly as it seeks to reduce its dependency on Chinese imports, especially after tensions such as the 2020 Galwan Valley clash. Efforts to address this include promoting domestic manufacturing under initiatives like "Make in India" and diversifying trade partners. (Singh, 10 Aug 2012) ^[16]
- ii). **Investment and Infrastructure:** Chinese investments in India have been limited compared to other countries, partly due to geopolitical mistrust and regulatory barriers. However, Chinese firms like Alibaba, Tencent, and Xiaomi have made significant inroads into India's tech and consumer markets. Conversely, Indian investments in China remain minimal, reflecting the asymmetry in economic engagement. Infrastructure development, particularly through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been another contentious area. India opposes the BRI, citing sovereignty concerns over projects in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, further complicating economic cooperation. (Panda, 12 Sep 2014)
- iii). **Competition in Third Markets:** Beyond bilateral ties, China and India compete in third-party markets, particularly in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Both nations vie for influence through trade, investment, and development projects. For instance, China's state-backed financing and infrastructure projects often outpace India's efforts, giving Beijing an edge in these regions. This competition extends to global governance platforms like the WTO and BRICS, where both countries advocate for developing nations but also seek to assert leadership. (Gechev, April 17, 2020) ^[5]

iv). Economic Interdependence Amid Geopolitical Tensions: Despite geopolitical rivalry, economic interdependence persists. For example, India relies on China for critical inputs like active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) and electronic components. Similarly, China benefits from India's growing market for consumer goods and technology. However, geopolitical tensions periodically disrupt this interdependence, prompting calls for decoupling or self-reliance. The COVID-19 pandemic and border skirmishes have accelerated India's efforts to localize supply chains and explore alternative partnerships. (Bhunia, 2017)

The economic interaction between China and India reflects a paradox of interdependence and competition. While trade and investment link the two economies, structural imbalances, geopolitical tensions, and strategic competition hinder deeper cooperation. Addressing these challenges requires sustained dialogue and policy recalibration to balance economic pragmatism with national security concerns.

Military Posturing

i). Border Disputes and Militarization: The Sino-Indian border disputes, particularly along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), have become a critical arena for military posturing between the two nations. Both countries have heavily invested in infrastructure development and troop deployment in contested regions such as Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, and Aksai Chin. China has constructed extensive road networks, airbases, and logistics hubs near the LAC to consolidate its strategic advantage and improve its ability to project power in these areas. These developments allow China to maintain a strong presence and respond swiftly to any perceived threats. Meanwhile, India has countered by modernizing its armed forces, building new border roads, and deploying advanced weaponry, including missiles and surveillance systems, to enhance its defensive and offensive capabilities.

These measures reflect a mutual desire to assert dominance and deter aggression in the disputed territories. The competition to establish control over these strategically important areas underscores the deep-rooted mistrust between the two nations. While both sides aim to strengthen their positions along the LAC, their efforts also increase the risk of accidental clashes and escalation. This ongoing militarization highlights the delicate balance between asserting territorial claims and maintaining stability in one of the world's most volatile border regions. (Dutta, 22 Mar 2011) ^[1]

ii). Escalation and De-escalation Dynamics: Military standoffs, such as the 2017 Doklam crisis and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, highlight the volatility of Sino-Indian relations. These incidents underscore the risks of accidental escalation due to overlapping territorial claims and differing perceptions of the LAC. Both nations engage in periodic military exercises and troop mobilizations to signal resolve, but they also participate in diplomatic talks and confidence-building measures to manage tensions. For instance, agreements like the 1993 and 1996 border accords aim to reduce the likelihood of conflict, though their effectiveness remains limited. (Feigenbaum, 27 Jun 2007)

iii). Nuclear Deterrence and Strategic Balance: Nuclear Deterrence and Strategic Balance Nuclear capabilities play a critical role in the military posturing of both

nations. China's more advanced nuclear arsenal and missile technology contrast with India's growing deterrent capabilities, including its Agni missile series. While neither side seeks a direct nuclear confrontation, the presence of nuclear weapons adds complexity to their rivalry. Both nations adhere to a policy of "no first use" (NFU), but uncertainties about intentions and technological advancements contribute to strategic mistrust. This dynamic reinforces the need for stability mechanisms to prevent miscalculations. (Khan, 2022) ^[8]

iv). Regional Alliances and Military Diplomacy: Regional Alliances and Military Diplomacy Beyond bilateral interactions, China and India leverage regional alliances to bolster their military postures. China's strategic partnership with Pakistan, including arms sales and joint military exercises, serves as a counterbalance to India in South Asia. In response, India strengthens ties with other powers like the United States, Japan, and Australia through frameworks like the Quad, which includes maritime security cooperation and defense exchanges. These external alignments amplify the competitive dimension of their military strategies while complicating regional security dynamics. (Joshi, 23 Dec 2015) ^[7]

China's increasing military spending has become a significant focus of regional and global security discussions, underscoring Beijing's growing ambitions to project power and assert dominance in the Indo-Pacific region. China's defence budget has consistently risen in recent years, reflecting its efforts to modernize and expand its armed forces. This spending prioritizes advancements in cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, hypersonic missiles, and naval expansion, including the development of aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines. These investments are aimed at enhancing China's ability to challenge U.S. influence in the region and assert its claims over contested territories, particularly in the South China Sea and along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with India.

This rise in military expenditure has prompted neighbouring countries, including India, Japan, Australia, and Southeast Asian nations, to reassess their defence budgets and strategic postures. For instance, India has responded by accelerating its military modernization programs, investing in border infrastructure, and acquiring advanced weaponry such as Rafale fighter jets and S-400 missile defence systems. Regional powers are also strengthening alliances, such as through the Quad (comprising the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India), to counterbalance China's growing military assertiveness. While China justifies its increased spending as necessary for safeguarding sovereignty and territorial integrity, its actions have heightened tensions and spurred an arms race in the region, raising concerns about long-term stability and the potential for conflict. (Rajagopalan, 2025) ^[12]

Way Forward

The persistent militarized competition along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) underscores the need for a recalibrated approach to Sino-Indian military posturing, one that prioritizes de-escalation and stability while safeguarding strategic interests. A pragmatic policy framework can mitigate tensions and foster mutual trust in contested regions.

- **Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs):** Strengthening existing CBMs is imperative to enhance communication and reduce the risk of accidental escalation. This includes

establishing direct hotlines between military commanders, conducting joint patrolling exercises, and formalizing protocols for de-escalation during standoffs. Such measures would institutionalize transparency and build a foundation for sustained cooperation.

- **Infrastructure Moderation:** While China has significantly developed its infrastructure near the LAC, signalling goodwill by moderating further militarization in contested areas could encourage reciprocal actions from India. This moderation should be accompanied by verifiable commitments to prevent disproportionate military build-ups, thereby reducing the perception of an arms race.
- **Border Dispute Resolution:** Diplomatic efforts must be reinvigorated to address longstanding border disputes through bilateral negotiations or third-party mediation. A mutually acceptable demarcation of the LAC, coupled with legal frameworks to enforce agreements, would serve as a cornerstone for long-term stability.
- **Regional Stability Initiatives:** Collaborative efforts on non-traditional security issues, such as disaster management, counter-terrorism, and climate change adaptation, can foster trust and demonstrate the benefits of cooperative approaches over zero-sum competition. These initiatives align with broader regional aspirations for peace and sustainable development. Despite their asymmetric economic relationship, China and India possess significant potential for mutually beneficial cooperation. Strategic recalibration of economic policies can transform this asymmetry into a foundation for equitable interdependence.
- **Addressing Trade Imbalances:** To address India's concerns over the persistent trade deficit, China could increase imports from India in sectors where it holds comparative advantages, such as pharmaceuticals, IT services, agricultural products, and textiles. This recalibration would not only reduce economic friction but also enhance India's export competitiveness.
- **Investment Opportunities:** Encouraging Chinese investments in India's manufacturing and infrastructure sectors—under frameworks like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—could yield mutual benefits, provided sovereignty concerns are respected. Specifically, projects related to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir must be excluded or restructured to align with India's sensitivities.
- **Supply Chain Diversification:** In an era of geopolitical uncertainties, fostering collaboration on global supply chains, particularly in technology and renewable energy, can create win-win outcomes. Joint ventures in semiconductor production, electric vehicles, and green technologies could position both nations as leaders in emerging industries.
- **Post-Pandemic Cooperation:** The lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the importance of healthcare collaboration. Deepening cooperation in vaccine production, public health infrastructure, and medical research can serve as a model for addressing transnational challenges through economic partnership rather than competition. Diplomatic engagement remains pivotal for managing differences and fostering cooperation between China and India, two major powers with overlapping regional and global interests. A nuanced diplomatic strategy can bridge divides and promote shared objectives.

- **Multipolarity Advocacy:** Collaborating in multilateral forums such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the United Nations can advance a multipolar world order that accommodates the aspirations of emerging powers. By aligning on issues like reforming global governance institutions, both nations can project a united front against Western dominance.
- **Respect for Strategic Autonomy:** Acknowledging India's desire for strategic autonomy is critical to maintaining a balanced relationship. Pressuring India to align with either the U.S. or China risks exacerbating mistrust. Instead, emphasizing shared interests in areas like climate action, sustainable development, and global health can foster constructive dialogue.
- **Cultural and People-to-People Exchanges:** Expanding cultural diplomacy initiatives—through educational scholarships, tourism promotion, media exchanges, and academic collaborations—can improve public perceptions and build long-term goodwill. Such interactions lay the groundwork for deeper societal understanding and trust.
- **Conflict Prevention Mechanisms:** Establishing regular high-level dialogues and track-two diplomacy can preempt misunderstandings and escalations. Addressing sensitive topics like Tibet, Taiwan, and maritime security in a constructive manner will demonstrate both nations' commitment to peaceful coexistence.

Conclusion

The way forward for China's India policy necessitates a delicate balance between competition and cooperation across military, economic, and diplomatic domains. By adopting a dual strategy of containment and engagement, China can address India's security concerns while fostering economic interdependence and diplomatic trust. Confidence-building measures, equitable trade practices, and respectful diplomacy will be instrumental in navigating the complexities of this critical bilateral relationship. Such a recalibrated approach would not only stabilize Sino-Indian relations but also contribute to regional peace and prosperity in South Asia and beyond, underscoring the shared responsibility of both nations as emerging global powers.

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