

## India-China Relations: Realist Perspective

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**Abstract:** This article examines the evolving relationship between India and China through the intertwined lenses of cooperation and rivalry, situating their bilateral engagement within broader regional and global power dynamics. As two of Asia's most influential rising powers, India and China share deep historical links, vast populations, expanding economies, and aspirations for global leadership, yet their interactions are persistently shaped by mistrust, strategic competition, and unresolved territorial disputes. Using a realist framework, the article explores key dimensions of competition, including border disputes, the security dilemma, regional influence in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific, and China's strategic partnership with Pakistan. Simultaneously, it underscores areas of selective cooperation in trade, multilateral institutions, and global governance. The article concludes that India-China relations are best understood as a fragile equilibrium between rivalry and cooperation, with their future trajectory dependent on effective management of competition rather than its elimination.

### Introduction:

The goal of this article is to shed light on the intricate dynamics between cooperation and rivalry that define the relationship between China and India. The relationship between India and China cannot be comprehended by looking at each country in isolation. Both countries are significant Asian powers with rich cultural heritage, growing economies, and ambitious geopolitical goals. This article aims to shed light on the complex dynamics of their involvement by exploring the ways in which pragmatic cooperation and strategic rivalry influence their regional and bilateral actions. It seeks to elucidate the origins of distrust, the structural elements impacting competitive stances, and the changing power dynamics that perpetuate friction along geo-economics, political, and military dimensions. Concurrently, the article emphasizes the domains where collaboration becomes an essential strategic requirement, such as in discussions about the economy, the environment and energy, membership in international organizations, and common goals for progress. The goal of this article is to examine the ways in which China and India handle their competing interests while continuing to cooperate selectively by drawing a map of these similarities and differences. Readers will gain a better grasp of the larger patterns of interaction that impact regional stability in the Indo-Pacific and South Asia, as well as policy decisions and diplomatic behavior, through this dual study (Malone & Mukherjee, 2010). This article aims to lay a thorough conceptual groundwork for the topic chapters that follow, which will examine sector-specific concerns, potential conflict scenarios, and the future of India-China relations.

India overtook China as the most populated country in April 2023, according to UN projections, and the two countries together account for about 35 percent of the global population. Though the nations have a long and storied past, the Indo-Pacific region, the world economy, and international cooperation have all been profoundly affected by their recent economic development and rising political might. Although there have been certain areas of cooperation in trade and international organizations, the relationship between China and India has frequently been characterized by rivalry and competitiveness. China plans to spend heavily in emerging nations in order to solidify its position as a regional and, eventually, global power. To lessen its dependence on any one big power, India has established diplomatic ties with a number of nations and is working toward a multipolar regional and global structure. Because both nuclear-armed nations lay claim to strategically significant territory on the other side of their 2,100-mile-long common border, tensions between the two remain high. Although India is seen by many as a key ally in the fight against China's growth, analysts caution that India's readiness to support American interests will have its limitations, particularly in light of the fact that the recent tariffs imposed by US President Donald Trump on India might jeopardize this alliance. These two nations are political and economic behemoths in the Indo-Pacific region, and their combined influence may shake up global commerce and policy (Wolf, C. Jr. et al. 2011). India is the world's fastest-growing major economy, whereas China has dominated exports since 2009.

In their own eyes, they are development role models and saviors of the Global South. But the political structures in place in New Delhi, a strategic ally of the United States, and Beijing, an enemy of the United States, are very different. In contrast to India, the biggest democracy in the world, China has been under the Communist Party's authority since 1949. Both China and India aspire to be great powers, but they have different ideas about how to get there, thus their relationship is now precariously balanced between collaboration and rivalry. Tensions and distrust between China and India stem from the fact that the two nations share a border. This boundary, which served as a truce line following the Sino-Indian War of 1962, is officially known as the Line of Actual Control (LAC). At the root of the dispute was China's plan to link Tibet and Xinjiang via the Aksai Chin part of the larger Kashmir region by constructing a roadway across the area. In response, India increased the number of outposts and army deployments across the disputed boundary, which prompted Chinese forces to occupy Aksai Chin and the North-East Frontier Agency, which are now parts of the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Due to a bilateral agreement reached in 1993, the LAC now serves as the de facto boundary between the two nations, even though their respective territory claims overlap. Two large stretches of the border have recently sparked disagreements (Sen, 2017). Although the Aksai Chin region is a part of China's Tibet and Xinjiang autonomous zones, India maintains that it is a part of its Ladakh union territory.

Zangnan, which translates to "South Tibet" in Chinese, is what Arunachal Pradesh is supposedly called by China. Additionally, China does not acknowledge the northeastern Ladakh region of India as Indian land. Ladakh is a contentious area between Pakistan and India, and it shares a border with Pakistan. China has a history of provocations in the Laotian autonomous region (LAC), which it asserts as its own. The latest and most severe escalation

occurred in 2020, when a deadlock along the LAC's demarcation of Ladakh, Tibet, and Xinjiang led to the deaths of twenty Indian troops and four Chinese soldiers. These were the first casualties in the region caused by border disputes in over 45 years. Even while China wanted to keep the border issues separate and carry on with trade and commerce as normal, India was hesitant to do so in the absence of a settlement, and the two nations have continued to have small border conflicts ever since. After months of armed confrontation near the border, the two nations finally agreed in October 2024 to increase communication and collaboration in an effort to settle the dispute. Two months down the road, they had their first official discussion about lowering border tensions (Yang, et. al., 2020). "The agreement is more of a tactical thaw" than a "strategic shift," stated Tanvi Madan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, during an interview with the China Global podcast by the German Marshall Fund.

One such location that Bhutan claims is Dolkam, which "oversees a high vantage point that connects the subcontinent to what's on the eastern side of Bangladesh," according to Juster. According to **Derek Grossman**, a defense analyst at RAND Corp, the town of Tawang in India's northeastern Arunachal Pradesh has recently become a flashpoint due to its significance for Tibetan Buddhism outside of Tibet, as reported by the New York Times. Chinese officials are worried that the exiled Dalai Lama would use Tawang "as leverage to galvanize the Tibetan people to try and declare independence from China," according to Grossman. The Dalai Lama is now residing in India. Given the absence of development in these distant locations where a large portion of the population lives in isolation, commentators claim that the Indian government is worried that rural communities would turn to China for support. This is because China has provided housing and financial advantages to its own border villages. Both nations are vying to win over border populations by increasing cellular and infrastructural connectivity, spurred primarily by strategic considerations. pasture limitations caused by border conflicts have cut into the grazing pasture that nomadic groups rely on for their livelihood (Perry & Prasenjit, 2020).

### **Dimensions of competition**

#### **Realist Lens: Security Dilemma and Strategic Rivalry**

The value of commerce between the two countries rose from \$1.6 billion in 1997 to \$38.7 billion in 2007. China has quickly surpassed all other export markets to become India's fourth biggest. Investing may now proceed as planned on both fronts. Five billion US dollars is the goal that the Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry has set for luring Chinese imports by 2010. There were 2,900 Chinese contract laborers in India in 2007. The increasing trade between the two states is another indicator of the deepening dependency. With an increase of almost 500 thousand, the number of bilateral visits had quadrupled. During the same time period, the total number of bilateral agreements increased from five in 1990 to eighty-one in 2006, the average number of ministerial exchanges rose from two to four, and the number of track I and II dialogues accumulated from two to twelve. The leaders of China and India have revived the concept of their two countries working together in an unbreakable bond characterized by profound interdependence, which would inevitably lead to mutual respect and harmony. There is a lengthy history of animosity and conflict between the two

superpowers. The ongoing dispute over 130,000 square kilometers of border land in the western region Aksai Chin, which is administered by China, and the eastern portion of Arunachal Pradesh, which is controlled by India, has constituted the initial phase of this lengthy fight (Qazi, & Khalid, 2021). India has been pressing for a definitive Line of Actual Control (LAC) definition, while China has been pushing for an immediate final swap arrangement; this has delayed a final settlement after 20 years of negotiations.

In addition to these dissimilarities, next weak coalition governments in India have internal political pressure to avoid compromises that would compromise national security. Beijing has insisted that the strategically important region of Tawang, which is now in Arunachal Pradesh, not be included in any swap deal because of a monastery there that is crucial to the process of choosing a new Dalai Lama. Furthermore, China's negotiating position in relation to its many other territorial issues, particularly Taiwan, might be weakened if Beijing adopts a flexible stance on Arunachal. Experts agree that China and India have been able to make process rather than progress towards a final solution due to historical disputes, nationalism, and security concerns. The second level of tensions between China and India centers on Pakistan. As far as indirect competition is concerned, this nation has not changed. Beijing still sees Pakistan as a distant balancer towards India, so it keeps strengthening its military cooperation with India's archrival, even though China has urged both Islamabad and Delhi to end their Kashmir conflict and praised confidence building measures on both sides. The United States may have supplanted China as Pakistan's primary donor of financial help since 2001, but China remains the most advantageous military ally of Pakistan due to its enormous investment in the country's nuclear program. It is widely known that Beijing has provided assistance to Pakistan about their medium and short-range ballistic missiles (Jain, 2021). China announced a "step-by-step" plan to meet Pakistan's desire for an enlarged nuclear program after the US got its nuclear cooperation deal with India through.

Supplying Pakistan with new frigates and J-10 fighter jets is just one more way that Beijing shows its support for the Pakistani military despite the political unrest. There is financial backing for these arrangements, as is customary. Despite Delhi's objections, the Chinese government has gained access to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) through its special relations with Islamabad. Thirdly, there's the fierce competition for economic and geopolitical sway in the region. Delhi and Beijing are involved in a tit-for-tat game in nations like Nepal and Burma, which have traditionally served as buffer states between the regional security complexes in East and South Asia. Whenever there is a shift in the power dynamic between these nations, the other governments respond by stepping up their diplomatic efforts, economic cooperation, military backing, etc. India saw China's expanding diplomatic ties with countries like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh as an aggressive move to expand Chinese influence in the Indian subcontinent. The increasing need to enter international markets is the fourth factor that is causing competition to heat up. Many are worried that as a result of industrialization, China and India would have to compete economically and will do everything it takes to stay ahead of each other. Therefore, the security problem remains unchanged, despite the fact that interdependence has opened up

new avenues for synergy. Uncertainty about the intentions of a neighboring state is the foundation of any security challenge. The anarchical international system, which makes nations fearful that other states would destroy their sovereignty and national interests, is the root source of this dilemma. A tendency for self-sufficiency emerges as a result, manifesting itself in many ways such as power politics, mercantilist economic methods, etc. A security dilemma's resolution is dependent on several factors, one of which is the development of new material capabilities. Security concerns are exacerbated by changes in the relative strength of economic and military capabilities, as well as movements in the power balance. A second important issue is how both parties see each other. When another state's military strength is linked to hostile intents or bad precedents in history, it compounds the security challenge (Ramos, 2025).

### **Conclusion:**

The India–China relationship emerges from this chapter as a paradox of proximity: two ancient civilizations bound by geography and ambition, yet separated by mistrust, competing visions of power, and unresolved historical grievances. Their interaction is neither purely adversarial nor genuinely cooperative; rather, it is shaped by a persistent tension between strategic rivalry and pragmatic engagement. Border disputes, memories of the 1962 war, asymmetric power perceptions, and entanglements with third parties such as Pakistan and the United States continue to fuel suspicion and reinforce the security dilemma. At the same time, expanding economic interdependence, shared interests in global governance, climate change, energy security, and South–South cooperation compel both states to avoid outright confrontation.

This uneasy balance has produced a pattern of selective cooperation alongside structural competition, where dialogue mechanisms and confidence-building measures coexist with military modernization and geopolitical maneuvering. The chapter demonstrates that neither confrontation nor full alignment is inevitable. Instead, the future of India–China relations will depend on their ability to manage rivalry without allowing it to spiral into conflict, while deepening cooperation in areas of mutual benefit. Understanding this duality is essential for assessing regional stability in the Indo-Pacific and for anticipating how two rising powers will shape the evolving global order.

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