

India-China Relations in the 21st Century: Cooperation, Competition and Conflict

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ABSTRACT: India-China relations in the 21st century represent one of the most complex and strategically significant bilateral relationships in contemporary international politics. As two rising powers in Asia, India and China interact across multiple domains, including trade, diplomacy, security, and global governance. This relationship is simultaneously characterised by expanding economic cooperation, intensifying strategic competition, and persistent political and military conflict, particularly along their disputed border. This article examines the evolution of India-China relations by analysing historical legacies, economic interdependence, border disputes, regional geopolitics, and diplomatic engagement. Drawing on realist, liberal, and constructivist perspectives, the study argues that India-China relations are best understood as a pattern of competitive coexistence, where cooperation and conflict coexist without resolving underlying structural tensions. The article concludes by assessing the challenges and prospects for managing bilateral relations in an evolving regional and global order.

KEYWORDS: India-China relations, border dispute, strategic competition, economic interdependence, Asian geopolitics, Indo-Pacific

1. INTRODUCTION

India and China are among the most influential actors shaping the political and strategic landscape of Asia in the 21st century. Together, they account for a substantial share of the world's population and economic growth, making their bilateral relationship a critical determinant of regional stability and global governance (Roy, 2013; Zhang, 2018). Despite shared interests in economic development and multilateral cooperation, relations between the two countries remain deeply influenced by historical grievances, unresolved territorial disputes, and strategic mistrust.

The early decades of the 21st century initially generated optimism, particularly with the expansion of trade and diplomatic engagement. However, this optimism has been repeatedly undermined by military standoffs and political crises, most notably the Doklam confrontation in 2017 and the Galwan Valley clash in 2020 (Tellis, 2020). These developments reveal that cooperation and conflict are not mutually exclusive in India-China relations but coexist in a complex and often unstable equilibrium.

This article aims to analyse India-China relations through the interconnected dimensions of cooperation, competition, and conflict. It argues that the relationship cannot be adequately explained by a single theoretical framework and instead requires a multidimensional analytical approach.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding India-China relations require engagement with multiple theoretical perspectives in international relations. From a realist perspective, the relationship is shaped by power asymmetries, security dilemmas, and competition for regional influence (Waltz, 1979). China's rapid military modernisation and expanding strategic presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean are perceived by India as challenges to its security, while India's growing partnerships with other major powers are viewed by China with suspicion (Tellis, 2020).

In contrast, liberal theories emphasise the role of economic interdependence, institutions, and dialogue in mitigating conflict. The dramatic expansion of bilateral trade and cooperation within multilateral forums such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation reflects liberal expectations of cooperation through shared interests (Keohane & Nye, 2012). However, the persistence of conflict despite growing interdependence challenges the assumption that economic ties automatically produce political trust.

Constructivist approaches highlight the role of historical memory, identity, and perception. Competing narratives of sovereignty and status, shaped by the legacy of the 1962 war, continue to influence policy choices and public opinion in both countries (Garver, 2001). This article adopts a synthetic framework that integrates material, institutional, and ideational factors.

3. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

Modern India-China relations were initially marked by idealism following India's independence and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. The rhetoric of *Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai* symbolised hopes for Asian solidarity. However, these expectations collapsed with the 1962 border war, which created deep mistrust and fundamentally altered bilateral relations (Garver, 2001; Roy, 2013).

The late 20th century witnessed gradual normalisation through diplomatic engagement and confidence-building measures. Agreements such as the 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control helped stabilise the border and reduce the risk of conflict. The early 2000s marked a significant shift, with both countries recognising the benefits of engagement in an increasingly globalised economy (Kondapalli, 2022).

The 2005 Strategic and Cooperative Partnership reflected mutual intent to manage differences while expanding cooperation. However, the absence of a clearly demarcated boundary and divergent strategic interests ensured that underlying tensions persisted.

4. ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND STRATEGIC INTERDEPENDENCE

Economic engagement has been one of the most visible aspects of India-China relations in the 21st century. Bilateral trade expanded rapidly, making China one of India's largest trading partners. This growth reflected complementary economic structures and integration into global supply chains (Zhang, 2018).

Despite these gains, economic relations have been marked by asymmetry. India's exports to China remain limited, resulting in a persistent trade deficit and domestic concerns over dependency (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Strategic sectors such as telecommunications, digital infrastructure, and pharmaceuticals have become particularly sensitive, leading India to impose regulatory restrictions on Chinese investments.

Economic interdependence has not reduced strategic rivalry. Instead, it has coexisted with heightened political tensions, illustrating the limitations of liberal expectations that trade alone can stabilise relations (Keohane & Nye, 2012).

5. BORDER DISPUTES AND SECURITY DYNAMICS

The unresolved boundary dispute remains the most contentious issue in India-China relations. The Line of Actual Control stretches across multiple sectors but lacks mutual clarity, increasing the likelihood of patrol confrontations and misunderstandings (Garver, 2001).

The Galwan Valley clash of 2020 marked the most serious military confrontation since 1962, resulting in casualties on both sides and triggering a sharp deterioration in relations (Tellis, 2020). Although disengagement talks and military dialogues have reduced immediate tensions, the fundamental dispute remains unresolved (Kondapalli, 2022).

From a security perspective, the border dispute reinforces mutual threat perceptions and shapes defence planning. Both sides have strengthened infrastructure and troop deployments along the border, increasing the risk of future escalation.

6. STRATEGIC COMPETITION AND REGIONAL GEOPOLITICS

India and China also compete for influence across the broader Asian region. China's expanding presence in South Asia and its close strategic partnership with Pakistan are viewed by India as direct challenges to its security interests (Tellis, 2020). Infrastructure projects and connectivity initiatives have further intensified strategic rivalry.

India's response has involved strengthening ties with regional and extra-regional partners and articulating its vision of a free and inclusive Indo-Pacific (Pant & Joshi, 2019). While India maintains that such engagement is not directed against any specific country, China perceives these moves as part of a broader balancing strategy (Acharya, 2014).

7. MULTILATERAL ENGAGEMENTS AND GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Despite bilateral tensions, India and China cooperate within several multilateral frameworks, including BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the G20. These platforms allow both countries to coordinate on global economic governance, development finance, and climate change (Acharya, 2014; Zhang, 2018).

Multilateral engagement reflects a pragmatic approach, where shared interests coexist with strategic rivalry. However, cooperation in these forums has not eliminated bilateral mistrust, underscoring the compartmentalised nature of the relationship (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023).

8. DIPLOMACY, CRISIS MANAGEMENT, AND CONFIDENCE-BUILDING

Diplomatic engagement remains central to managing India-China relations. High-level political exchanges, military dialogues, and special representative talks have sought to prevent escalation and manage crises (Kondapalli, 2022).

While confidence-building measures have contributed to stability in the past, recent crises have revealed their limitations. The challenge lies in updating these mechanisms to reflect contemporary realities and reduce the risk of miscalculation (Tellis, 2020).

9. CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The future trajectory of India–China relations will be shaped by the ability of both sides to manage competition without allowing conflict to dominate. Key challenges include resolving or managing the border dispute, addressing economic asymmetries, and navigating broader geopolitical shifts (Roy, 2013; Acharya, 2014).

At the same time, opportunities for cooperation persist in areas such as climate change, global health, and reform of international institutions. The relationship is likely to remain characterised by cautious engagement and strategic rivalry rather than full reconciliation (Zhang, 2018).

10. CONCLUSION

India–China relations in the 21st century are defined by a complex interaction of cooperation, competition, and conflict. Economic engagement and multilateral cooperation coexist with strategic rivalry and unresolved territorial disputes. This article argues that the concept of competitive coexistence best captures the current state of bilateral relations (Acharya, 2014; Tellis, 2020).

Managing this relationship will require sustained dialogue, pragmatic diplomacy, and mutual recognition of interests and constraints. The evolution of India–China relations will continue to shape the future of Asian and global politics.

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