

India–China Strategic Relations: Managing Competitive Coexistence in an Evolving Multipolar Asian Order

Patil Archana Prakash

Research Scholar, Department of Arts, Malwanchal University, Indore

Dr. Nimba Zopa Patil

Supervisor, Department of Arts, Malwanchal University, Indore

Abstract

India–China strategic relations constitute a critical axis of contemporary Asian and global politics, characterized by a complex interplay of cooperation, competition, and strategic mistrust. As two major civilizational states and emerging global powers, India and China significantly influence the evolving multipolar order in Asia. While bilateral engagement has expanded in areas such as trade, climate diplomacy, and participation in multilateral forums including BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, structural challenges continue to constrain the relationship. The unresolved boundary dispute along the Line of Actual Control remains a central source of tension, periodically leading to military standoffs and erosion of strategic trust. At the same time, China's growing strategic presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region and India's increasing involvement in the Indo-Pacific reflect competing regional visions. Despite these challenges, both countries acknowledge the high costs of open conflict and have sought to manage tensions through diplomatic dialogue, confidence-building mechanisms, and crisis management frameworks. Selective cooperation on global issues such as climate change, development finance, and reform of international institutions further demonstrates pragmatic engagement. India–China relations are best understood as a framework of competitive coexistence, where rivalry and cooperation coexist, and long-term stability depends on effective dispute management and strategic restraint.

Keywords: India–China relations; strategic competition; multipolar Asia; border disputes; global governance

Introduction

India–China strategic relations constitute one of the most complex and consequential bilateral relationships in contemporary international politics, shaped by a mix of historical legacies, geopolitical competition, economic interdependence, and evolving regional and global dynamics. As two ancient civilizations and emerging major powers of the Global South, India and China share civilizational ties rooted in trade, cultural exchange, and philosophical interactions dating back centuries. However, modern relations have been profoundly influenced by colonial-era boundaries, divergent national identities, and competing strategic visions following their emergence as independent states in the mid-twentieth century. The unresolved boundary dispute along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), stretching across the western, middle, and eastern sectors, remains the most persistent source of mistrust and has periodically escalated into military standoffs, most notably the 1962 war and more recent confrontations since 2017. Strategically, the relationship is marked by asymmetry in power capabilities, with China's rapid economic growth and military modernization altering the

regional balance, while India seeks to safeguard its territorial integrity, strategic autonomy, and regional influence. At the same time, both countries are deeply embedded in an interconnected global economy, with China being one of India's largest trading partners, creating a paradox of cooperation and competition. Multilaterally, India and China interact within forums such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), G20, and the United Nations, where they often collaborate on issues like global governance reform, development financing, and climate change, even as their strategic interests diverge on regional security, connectivity, and norms. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and India's concerns over sovereignty, particularly in relation to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), underscore competing regional visions in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region. Furthermore, India's deepening partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia through the Quad, and China's strategic alignment with Pakistan and expanding presence in the Indian Ocean, add layers of external balancing and strategic signaling to the bilateral equation. Thus, India–China strategic relations are best understood as a dynamic interplay of rivalry and engagement, where cooperation in global and economic arenas coexists with deep-rooted strategic distrust and security competition, making the relationship a defining factor for stability and power transitions in Asia and the wider international system.

Evaluation of India–China Strategic Relations

The evaluation of India–China strategic relations reveals a complex balance between cautious engagement and structural rivalry, shaped by historical grievances, shifting power asymmetries, and competing regional ambitions. At the core of the relationship lies the unresolved boundary dispute, which continues to undermine mutual trust despite multiple confidence-building measures, border management agreements, and diplomatic dialogue mechanisms. Incidents along the Line of Actual Control, particularly the Doklam standoff (2017) and the eastern Ladakh crisis since 2020, have exposed the fragility of existing agreements and highlighted the growing militarization of the border, forcing both sides to reassess their security postures and strategic intentions. From India's perspective, China's assertive behavior is viewed as an attempt to unilaterally alter the status quo, while China perceives India's infrastructure development and strategic partnerships as challenges to its regional primacy. Economically, the relationship presents a paradox: bilateral trade has expanded significantly, yet it remains heavily imbalanced in China's favor, reinforcing Indian concerns over dependency, market access, and technological vulnerabilities. Strategic mistrust has also deepened due to China's close ties with Pakistan, including military cooperation and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, which India sees as a direct infringement on its sovereignty. In the broader regional context, China's expanding footprint in South Asia and the Indian Ocean through port development, connectivity projects, and naval presence is often interpreted in India as strategic encirclement, while India's active role in the Quad and its alignment with like-minded democracies are viewed by China as containment. Nevertheless, the relationship is not defined solely by confrontation. Both countries continue to cooperate within multilateral platforms such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, G20, and the United Nations, where they share interests in reforming global governance structures,

promoting multipolarity, and advancing the concerns of developing countries. Diplomatic engagement at high levels, including summits and special representative talks, reflects a mutual recognition that sustained conflict would be detrimental to regional stability and economic growth.

Historical Background of India–China Relations

The historical background of India–China relations is rooted in ancient civilizational interactions, yet the modern bilateral relationship has been largely shaped by developments in the twentieth century following the end of colonial rule and the rise of both states as sovereign actors. Historically, India and China were connected through extensive trade networks such as the Silk Route, and cultural exchanges, particularly the spread of Buddhism from India to China, which fostered intellectual and religious linkages over centuries without major recorded conflicts. In the modern era, the relationship began on a positive note after India's independence in 1947 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, with India being among the first non-socialist countries to recognize the PRC. The early 1950s witnessed a phase of optimism symbolized by the Panchsheel Agreement of 1954, which emphasized the principles of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect for sovereignty, and popularized the slogan "Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai." However, this goodwill proved fragile as underlying disagreements over the undefined Himalayan boundary, inherited from colonial-era arrangements, remained unresolved. The situation deteriorated rapidly with growing strategic mistrust, competing territorial claims in Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh, and differing perceptions of security, culminating in the brief but decisive Sino-Indian War of 1962, which profoundly altered the trajectory of bilateral relations and left deep psychological and strategic scars in India. In the aftermath, diplomatic relations remained strained for over a decade, marked by reduced engagement and heightened suspicion, though limited normalization began in the late 1970s with the restoration of ambassadorial-level ties in 1976.

Panchsheel and Early Cooperation

The early phase of India–China relations after independence was characterized by optimism, idealism, and a strong emphasis on peaceful coexistence, encapsulated in the Panchsheel principles that guided bilateral engagement in the 1950s. India, having gained independence in 1947, and the People's Republic of China, established in 1949, emerged as post-colonial Asian nations seeking to assert sovereignty, resist imperialism, and promote Asian solidarity in global affairs. India was among the first countries to recognize the PRC and actively supported China's admission to the United Nations, reflecting its belief in constructive engagement and non-alignment. This spirit of cooperation culminated in the 1954 Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and India, which formally articulated the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence—mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. Popularized through the slogan "Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai," Panchsheel symbolized a normative framework aimed at fostering trust, stability, and long-term cooperation between the two neighbors. During this period, cultural exchanges, high-level visits, and diplomatic engagement expanded, and both countries collaborated within the Non-

Aligned Movement to promote independent foreign policies and a more equitable international order. However, this early cooperation was also marked by underlying contradictions and strategic naivety, particularly India's limited attention to unresolved boundary issues and China's consolidation of control over Tibet, which altered the strategic landscape of the Himalayas. While Panchsheel provided an ethical and diplomatic foundation for bilateral relations, it lacked effective mechanisms to address hard security concerns, especially territorial disputes. Consequently, despite its symbolic importance, the Panchsheel phase remained fragile, as the divergence between idealistic principles and geopolitical realities gradually eroded mutual confidence, setting the stage for later confrontation.

The 1962 Conflict and Its Legacy

The 1962 Sino-Indian conflict represents a decisive turning point in India–China relations, fundamentally reshaping perceptions, policies, and strategic calculations on both sides. The war was rooted in long-standing boundary disputes along the Himalayan frontier, particularly in Aksai Chin in the western sector and the North-East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh) in the eastern sector, where colonial-era boundaries such as the McMahon Line were contested by China. Throughout the late 1950s, tensions escalated due to China's construction of a strategic road linking Xinjiang and Tibet through Aksai Chin, India's forward policy aimed at asserting territorial claims, and deteriorating trust following the Tibetan uprising of 1959 and the Dalai Lama's asylum in India. In October 1962, China launched coordinated military offensives across both sectors, overwhelming Indian forces that were ill-prepared in terms of logistics, infrastructure, and intelligence. The brief but intense conflict ended with China's unilateral ceasefire in November 1962, leaving it in control of Aksai Chin and dealing a severe psychological and strategic blow to India. The legacy of the war has been profound and enduring, embedding deep mistrust and caution into bilateral relations. For India, the conflict prompted a major reassessment of defense policy, leading to military modernization, increased defense spending, and a more pragmatic approach to China. It also influenced India's strategic partnerships and its emphasis on safeguarding territorial integrity. For China, the war consolidated its control over disputed territories and reinforced its willingness to use force to secure core interests. Even decades later, the shadow of 1962 continues to shape border negotiations, crisis perceptions, and public opinion, making it a defining reference point in the strategic relationship between the two countries.

Border Disputes and Security Concerns

Border disputes and associated security concerns form the most persistent and sensitive dimension of India–China strategic relations, profoundly shaping mutual perceptions and policy choices. The two countries share a long and disputed boundary of over 3,400 kilometers, divided into the western sector (Aksai Chin in Ladakh), the middle sector (Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand), and the eastern sector (Arunachal Pradesh), with differing historical claims and interpretations of colonial-era boundaries. The absence of a mutually agreed Line of Actual Control has resulted in overlapping perceptions, making the border susceptible to patrol confrontations, infrastructure competition, and accidental escalation. Although a series of agreements since 1993, including those in 1996, 2005, and 2013, sought to maintain peace

through confidence-building measures such as restrictions on troop deployments and mechanisms for dialogue, these arrangements have come under increasing strain. The Doklam standoff in 2017 and the prolonged eastern Ladakh crisis since 2020, including violent clashes in the Galwan Valley, underscored the fragility of existing frameworks and marked a significant deterioration in trust. From India's perspective, China's rapid military modernization, enhanced border infrastructure, and perceived attempts to alter the status quo raise serious concerns about territorial integrity and strategic vulnerability. China, in turn, views India's improved border connectivity, forward deployment of forces, and growing security partnerships with external powers as potential threats to its security interests. The border issue is further intertwined with broader regional and geopolitical dynamics, including China's strategic relationship with Pakistan and its activities in the Indian Ocean region, which India perceives as elements of strategic pressure. These concerns have compelled India to recalibrate its defense posture through enhanced surveillance, infrastructure development, and force readiness along the northern frontier. At the same time, both sides remain aware that sustained military confrontation would be costly and destabilizing, prompting continued diplomatic and military-level talks to manage tensions. Overall, border disputes act not only as a territorial disagreement but also as a symbol of deeper strategic mistrust, making effective conflict management, confidence-building, and political will essential for preventing escalation and ensuring stability in India–China relations.

Line of Actual Control (LAC)

The Line of Actual Control (LAC) constitutes the *de facto* boundary between India and China and lies at the heart of their enduring border dispute and security concerns. Unlike a clearly demarcated and mutually accepted international boundary, the LAC is an imprecise and contested line, the alignment of which differs significantly in Indian and Chinese perceptions across the western, middle, and eastern sectors. Its origins can be traced to the post-1962 conflict ceasefire positions, yet it has never been formally clarified or jointly delineated on maps, leaving substantial scope for ambiguity and overlapping patrol claims. This lack of clarity has made the LAC prone to frequent face-offs between border patrols, often triggered by differing interpretations of territorial control. In recent years, the strategic importance of the LAC has intensified due to improved infrastructure, enhanced mobility, and expanded military deployments on both sides, reducing reaction times and increasing the risks of miscalculation. From India's standpoint, China's extensive development of roads, airstrips, and logistics networks in Tibet has altered the operational balance, while China views India's accelerated border infrastructure projects as efforts to strengthen forward posture. The absence of a mutually agreed LAC has also complicated diplomatic negotiations, as progress on boundary clarification is often subordinated to broader strategic mistrust. Moreover, the LAC has evolved from a relatively stable frontier into an active zone of strategic signaling, where patrol movements and infrastructure development convey political intent. As a result, the LAC is no longer merely a technical or cartographic issue but a central strategic challenge that directly affects military planning, crisis management, and bilateral trust in India–China relations.

Military Standoffs and Confidence-Building Measures

Military standoffs along the India–China border highlight the fragile security environment created by the unresolved boundary dispute, while confidence-building measures (CBMs) reflect efforts to prevent escalation and maintain stability. Since the 1980s, both countries have experienced periodic confrontations along the Line of Actual Control, ranging from localized patrol face-offs to prolonged stand-offs involving thousands of troops, as seen in incidents such as Doklam in 2017 and eastern Ladakh since 2020. These standoffs are often driven by competing patrol activities, infrastructure development near contested areas, and heightened strategic suspicion. The increasing proximity of forces, coupled with rapid mobilization capabilities, has raised the risk of accidental clashes, exemplified by violent encounters that broke long-standing norms against the use of firearms. In response, India and China have developed a framework of CBMs through a series of bilateral agreements, beginning with the 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the LAC, followed by accords in 1996, 2005, 2013, and 2020, which established protocols for troop conduct, communication mechanisms, and crisis management. These measures include flag meetings, hotlines between military commanders, restrictions on the use of weapons, and diplomatic-level consultations. While CBMs have historically helped contain tensions and prevent full-scale conflict, recent standoffs have exposed their limitations, as political trust has eroded and strategic competition has intensified. Consequently, military standoffs and CBMs together illustrate the paradox of India–China border management, where mechanisms for stability coexist with recurring crises, underscoring the need for renewed political engagement and effective confidence restoration.

Economic Relations and Strategic Competition

Economic relations between India and China form a paradoxical pillar of their strategic engagement, characterized simultaneously by deepening interdependence and intensifying competition. Over the past two decades, bilateral trade has expanded rapidly, making China one of India's largest trading partners, particularly in sectors such as electronics, machinery, pharmaceuticals, and intermediate industrial goods. This growing economic engagement has contributed to India's manufacturing and consumer markets, but it has also resulted in a persistent and widening trade imbalance in China's favor, raising concerns in India about overdependence, supply-chain vulnerabilities, and limited access to Chinese markets. Strategic competition increasingly shapes the economic dimension, as India has adopted measures to scrutinize Chinese investments, restrict certain technology platforms, and promote self-reliance through initiatives such as "Atmanirbhar Bharat." These policies reflect broader security considerations, especially after border tensions heightened perceptions of economic leverage as a strategic tool. From China's perspective, India represents both a significant market and a competitor in the Global South, particularly in attracting foreign investment, expanding digital infrastructure, and shaping regional connectivity norms. The economic relationship is further complicated by competing development and connectivity visions, notably China's Belt and Road Initiative and India's reservations over sovereignty and debt sustainability, leading India to pursue alternative regional partnerships and infrastructure initiatives. Multilaterally, India

and China often find common ground in platforms like BRICS, the G20, and the World Trade Organization, advocating for reforms in global economic governance, greater representation for developing countries, and resistance to protectionism by advanced economies. Yet, even within these forums, subtle rivalry persists over leadership roles and agenda-setting influence. Thus, economic relations between India and China are increasingly inseparable from strategic calculations, where trade and investment coexist with efforts to reduce vulnerabilities and counterbalance influence. This blend of engagement and competition underscores the evolving nature of India–China relations, in which economic cooperation remains significant but is carefully managed within a broader framework of strategic caution and geopolitical rivalry.

Trade Dependence and Imbalance

Trade dependence and imbalance constitute a critical aspect of India–China economic relations, reflecting both the depth of engagement and the strategic vulnerabilities embedded within it. Over the years, bilateral trade has grown substantially, positioning China as one of India's largest sources of imports, particularly in sectors such as electronics, telecommunications equipment, power machinery, active pharmaceutical ingredients, and industrial components. This pattern has created a structural dependence of Indian manufacturing and healthcare sectors on Chinese intermediate goods, which are often cost-competitive and available at scale. However, India's exports to China remain relatively narrow and concentrated in raw materials and low value-added products, such as iron ore, cotton, and certain chemicals, resulting in a persistent and widening trade deficit heavily skewed in China's favor. This imbalance has raised strategic concerns in India about economic leverage, supply-chain disruptions, and long-term impacts on domestic industrial capacity. The situation gained sharper strategic salience following border tensions, which reinforced perceptions that economic interdependence could be exploited during periods of political or security crisis. Consequently, India has intensified efforts to diversify supply chains, encourage domestic manufacturing, and reduce critical import dependence through policy initiatives such as production-linked incentives and “Atmanirbhar Bharat.” At the same time, the scale and complexity of existing trade ties make rapid decoupling impractical, as Chinese inputs remain integral to several Indian industries. From a strategic perspective, trade imbalance is no longer viewed merely as an economic issue but as a component of national security, influencing policy debates on tariffs, investment screening, and technological self-reliance. Thus, trade dependence and imbalance exemplify the uneasy intersection of economic necessity and strategic caution in India–China relations.

Economic Engagement amid Rivalry

Economic engagement amid rivalry defines the contemporary phase of India–China relations, where cooperation in trade and multilateral economic governance persists despite intensifying strategic competition. Even as political trust has declined, both countries continue to recognize the mutual benefits of economic interaction, particularly in a global environment marked by uncertainty, protectionism, and shifting supply chains. Chinese firms have historically played a significant role in India's manufacturing, infrastructure, and digital ecosystems, while Indian companies have sought access to Chinese markets and global value chains. However, growing

strategic mistrust has prompted India to recalibrate the terms of engagement through stricter investment screening, technology regulations, and limits on participation in sensitive sectors, especially in telecommunications, digital platforms, and critical infrastructure. This selective engagement reflects an effort to balance economic growth with security imperatives rather than pursue complete disengagement. At the multilateral level, India and China often coordinate positions within institutions such as BRICS, the G20, and the World Trade Organization, advocating for reform of global financial institutions, greater voice for developing economies, and resistance to Western dominance in economic rule-making. Yet, rivalry remains evident in competition for influence across Asia, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific, where both countries promote alternative development models, financing mechanisms, and connectivity initiatives. Economic engagement thus operates within clear strategic boundaries, shaped by caution, diversification, and competitive positioning. This coexistence of cooperation and rivalry underscores the pragmatic but guarded nature of India–China economic relations in an era of heightened geopolitical contestation.

China's Regional Influence and India's Concerns

China's expanding regional influence across Asia and the Indian Ocean region has emerged as a central factor shaping India–China strategic relations, generating deep strategic concerns in New Delhi. Over the past two decades, China has significantly increased its political, economic, and strategic footprint in South Asia through large-scale infrastructure investments, development financing, military cooperation, and diplomatic engagement with India's neighboring countries, including Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have enabled China to fund and construct ports, roads, railways, and energy projects, thereby enhancing connectivity while also raising questions about debt sustainability, strategic access, and long-term influence. From India's perspective, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor is particularly sensitive, as it passes through Pakistan-occupied territories claimed by India, reinforcing concerns about sovereignty and strategic encirclement. China's growing naval presence in the Indian Ocean, facilitated by port access arrangements and logistical facilities in countries like Sri Lanka and Djibouti, has further heightened India's security anxieties, as it challenges India's traditional maritime primacy in its immediate neighborhood. Beyond hard infrastructure, China has also expanded its influence through economic aid, technology exports, arms sales, and political engagement, often presenting itself as a reliable development partner without political conditionalities. India views these developments as altering the regional balance of power and constraining its strategic space in South Asia. In response, India has sought to strengthen ties with neighboring countries through development partnerships, capacity building, and regional initiatives such as "Neighborhood First," while also deepening engagement in the Indo-Pacific with like-minded partners. Nevertheless, China's ability to leverage economic resources and strategic planning gives it considerable influence, complicating India's regional leadership aspirations. Thus, China's regional influence and India's concerns reflect a broader strategic competition, where overlapping spheres of influence, differing development models, and security perceptions interact to shape the evolving dynamics of India–China relations and regional stability.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a central instrument of China's regional and global strategy, and it has been a major source of concern for India within the broader framework of India–China strategic relations. Launched in 2013, the BRI aims to enhance connectivity through infrastructure development, trade corridors, and economic integration across Asia, Africa, and Europe. While China presents the initiative as a cooperative development framework, India has consistently opposed BRI, primarily on grounds of sovereignty, transparency, and strategic intent. India's strongest objection is directed at the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, a flagship BRI project that passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which India claims as its territory. Beyond sovereignty issues, India is concerned that BRI projects often create unsustainable debt burdens for smaller regional states, increasing their economic dependence on China and enabling Beijing to gain long-term strategic leverage over critical infrastructure such as ports and transport hubs. The development of ports in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and other Indian Ocean littoral states is viewed in India as potentially dual-use, capable of supporting both commercial and military activities. Moreover, BRI challenges India's own regional connectivity and development initiatives, diluting New Delhi's influence in South Asia and its immediate neighborhood. India has instead emphasized alternative models of connectivity based on principles of transparency, financial sustainability, local capacity building, and respect for sovereignty, while collaborating with partners such as Japan and the European Union.

Conclusion

The conclusion of India–China Strategic Relations: Managing Competitive Coexistence in an Evolving Multipolar Asian Order underscores the enduring complexity and strategic significance of the relationship between India and China in contemporary international politics. As two rising powers with expanding economic, political, and military capabilities, their interactions shape not only the Asian balance of power but also broader patterns of global governance. While bilateral engagement has produced areas of cooperation—most notably in trade, climate diplomacy, and multilateral platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation—these have not been sufficient to offset deep-rooted strategic mistrust. The unresolved boundary dispute along the Line of Actual Control remains the most persistent source of tension, periodically triggering military crises that highlight the fragility of confidence-building mechanisms. At the same time, China's growing strategic footprint in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, combined with India's increasing engagement in the Indo-Pacific and partnerships with extra-regional powers, has reinforced competitive dynamics. Nevertheless, both countries recognize that sustained confrontation would be economically costly and strategically destabilizing, particularly in an interconnected global economy. This awareness has encouraged a cautious emphasis on diplomatic dialogue, crisis management, and selective cooperation on global challenges such as climate change, development finance, and reform of international institutions. Ultimately, India–China strategic relations are neither defined by alliance nor inevitable conflict but by competitive coexistence, where rivalry and cooperation operate simultaneously. The long-term stability of

this relationship will depend on effective management of disputes, strategic restraint, and mutual acknowledgment of each other's core interests. In an increasingly multipolar Asian order, the ability of India and China to balance competition with pragmatic engagement will remain a decisive factor for regional peace and global stability.

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