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India–China Relations Since 1960: Conflict, Cooperation, and Strategic Competition

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Abstract: India–China relations since 1960 have been shaped by conflict, cooperation, and strategic competition. The 1962 border war created deep mistrust, while unresolved territorial disputes continue to influence bilateral ties. Despite periods of diplomatic engagement, agreements, and growing economic relations, both countries remain cautious of each other’s regional and global ambitions. Trade has expanded significantly, but imbalance and dependence have created new concerns for India. Strategic rivalry has also increased through military modernization, border infrastructure, China’s role in South Asia, and India’s partnerships with countries such as the United States, Japan, and Australia. At the same time, both states recognize the importance of dialogue, regional stability, and economic cooperation. Therefore, India–China relations cannot be described as fully hostile or fully cooperative. Their future depends on peaceful border management, balanced trade, diplomatic communication, and mutual restraint.

Keywords: India-China Relations; Border Dispute; Strategic Rivalry; Cooperation; Diplomacy



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1. Introduction

India and China stand as two of the most influential powers in Asia, not only because of their large populations but also due to their growing economic, political, and military capabilities. Both countries have ancient civilizations and share a long geographical boundary, which naturally places them in a position of continuous interaction. Since the mid-20th century, their rise has significantly shaped regional and global dynamics, especially in Asia. Their roles in institutions such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the G20 further reinforce their importance in global governance structures (Pant, 2016; Garver, 2016). At the same time, their development trajectories differ. China’s rapid industrial growth and centralized political system contrast with India’s democratic governance and mixed economic path. These differences have influenced how both states perceive each other strategically, often combining elements of cooperation with suspicion (Tellis, 2020). The India–China relationship is complex and cannot be reduced to a single dimension. It includes phases of cooperation, particularly in trade and multilateral diplomacy, alongside periods of intense conflict and rivalry. On one hand, bilateral trade has expanded significantly since the early 2000s, making China one of India’s largest trading partners (Mohan, 2015). On the other hand, persistent security concerns and strategic mistrust continue to define their engagement. Competition is evident in areas such as regional influence in South Asia, infrastructure development, and maritime presence in the Indian Ocean. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is viewed by India as a strategic challenge (Chandran, 2018). Meanwhile, India’s increasing alignment with powers like the United States through frameworks such as the Quad reflects a balancing strategy against China (Pant & Joshi, 2017). The most persistent issue in India–China relations since 1960 has been the unresolved border dispute. The boundary, divided into western (Aksai

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Chin), middle, and eastern (Arunachal Pradesh) sectors, was never clearly demarcated during colonial times. This ambiguity has led to repeated tensions and military standoffs, including the 1962 war and more recent incidents such as Doklam (2017) and Galwan (2020) (Maxwell, 2013; Singh, 2021). Despite multiple rounds of negotiations and agreements aimed at maintaining peace along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the dispute continues to undermine trust. It remains the core factor shaping strategic calculations on both sides, influencing military deployments, diplomatic engagement, and broader foreign policy approaches (Garver, 2016).

2. Historical Background

2.1 Early friendship was based on Panchsheel and “Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai”

In the early years after independence, India and China shared a vision of post-colonial solidarity and peaceful coexistence. This spirit was formalized through the Panchsheel Agreement of 1954, which emphasized mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression, and peaceful coexistence (Mohan, 2015). The popular slogan “Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai” symbolized this friendship and optimism about Asian unity. Both countries also collaborated in international forums, advocating for decolonization and a multipolar world order. Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Zhou Enlai sought to build a cooperative relationship that could serve as a model for other developing nations (Pant, 2016).

2.2 Relations worsened after the Tibetan uprising and border disagreements

The turning point in India–China relations came with the Tibetan uprising of 1959. India’s decision to grant asylum to the Dalai Lama was perceived by China as interference in its internal affairs. This event significantly strained diplomatic ties and deepened mistrust (Garver, 2016). Disagreements over the border became more pronounced. China’s construction of a road through Aksai Chin, a region claimed by India, further escalated tensions. Diplomatic efforts to resolve these disputes failed, leading to an increasingly hostile atmosphere (Maxwell, 2013).

2.3 The undefined border created long-term mistrust

The lack of a clearly defined boundary has been the root cause of long-term mistrust between the two countries. The McMahon Line in the eastern sector was accepted by India but rejected by China, while the western sector remained largely undefined. These ambiguities created overlapping territorial claims and competing narratives of sovereignty (Singh, 2021). This unresolved issue has influenced military planning, diplomatic engagement, and public perception in both countries. Even during periods of improved relations, the border question has remained a sensitive and unresolved issue, preventing the development of full strategic trust (Tellis, 2020).

3. The 1962 Sino-Indian War

3.1 The main causes were disputes over Aksai Chin and NEFA/Arunachal Pradesh

The 1962 Sino-Indian War was primarily driven by territorial disputes in two key regions: Aksai Chin in the west and the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), now Arunachal Pradesh, in the east. India claimed sovereignty over both regions, while China asserted control, particularly over Aksai Chin, which was strategically important for connecting Tibet and Xinjiang (Maxwell, 2013). India’s “Forward Policy,” which involved establishing military outposts in disputed areas, further heightened tensions. China viewed this as a provocation, while India saw it as a defensive measure to assert its territorial claims (Garver, 2016).

3.2 China defeated India militarily

The war, which began in October 1962, resulted in a decisive military victory for China. Chinese forces advanced rapidly in both sectors, overwhelming Indian troops who were inadequately prepared for high-altitude warfare. Within a month, China declared a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew from some areas, while retaining control over Aksai Chin (Singh, 2021). The conflict exposed significant weaknesses in India’s military preparedness and strategic planning. It also demonstrated China’s willingness to use force to assert its territorial claims, setting a precedent for future interactions (Tellis, 2020).

3.3 The war deeply damaged Indian foreign policy and security thinking

The 1962 war had a profound impact on India’s foreign policy and security outlook. It shattered the idealistic belief in peaceful coexistence and forced India to adopt a more realistic and security-oriented approach. Military modernization became a priority, and India strengthened its defense capabilities in the following decades (Mohan, 2015). The war also influenced India’s diplomatic strategy, leading to closer ties with countries like the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. More importantly, it entrenched a deep sense of mistrust toward China that continues to shape bilateral relations even today (Pant & Joshi, 2017).

4. Border Disputes and Military Tensions



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Border disputes remain the most sensitive and destabilizing aspect of India–China relations. The core issue is not merely territorial disagreement but the absence of a clearly demarcated boundary, which continues to generate recurring friction and mistrust.

4.1 The Line of Actual Control remains undemarcated

The Line of Actual Control (LAC), which separates Indian and Chinese forces, has never been mutually agreed upon on maps or on the ground. Both sides have differing perceptions of the LAC, leading to frequent patrol confrontations and “face-offs” (Fravel, 2008; Garver, 2011). The ambiguity allows each side to assert territorial claims without formal escalation, but it also increases the risk of miscalculation (Tellis, 2020). Despite several rounds of negotiations and confidence-building measures, the absence of clarity continues to undermine long-term stability (Pant & Joshi, 2022).

4.2 Major tensions include Nathu La and Cho La, Sumdorong Chu, Doklam, Galwan, and Tawang

Historically, the border has witnessed multiple flashpoints. The clashes at Nathu La and Cho La in 1967 demonstrated that tensions persisted even after the 1962 war (Maxwell, 2001). Later, the Sumdorong Chu standoff in 1986–87 marked a serious military confrontation, though it was eventually resolved through diplomacy (Garver, 2011). The Doklam standoff in 2017 highlighted the strategic competition between India and China, especially concerning Bhutan’s territory (Pant & Joshi, 2022). The Galwan Valley clash in 2020 was the most serious escalation in decades, resulting in casualties on both sides and marking a turning point in bilateral relations (Tellis, 2020; Singh, 2021). Tensions have also surfaced in areas like Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, reflecting China’s persistent claims over the region (Mohan, 2023).

4.3 The 2020 Galwan clash revived serious hostility; disengagement has improved since the 2024 border agreement, but trust remains weak

The Galwan clash fundamentally altered the trajectory of India–China relations by eroding decades of confidence-building efforts (Tellis, 2020). It led to military mobilization along the border and a breakdown in political trust (Singh, 2021). Although subsequent negotiations have resulted in partial disengagement and de-escalation, particularly after the 2024 border understanding, the relationship remains fragile (Mohan, 2023). Trust deficits continue to shape strategic calculations on both sides, with increased militarization and infrastructure development along the border (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Thus, while mechanisms for crisis management exist, the underlying dispute remains unresolved, sustaining a pattern of intermittent confrontation.

5. Diplomatic Engagement

Despite recurring tensions, India and China have consistently maintained diplomatic channels, reflecting a pragmatic approach to managing differences while avoiding full-scale conflict.

5.1 India and China restored ambassador-level relations in 1976

After a prolonged freeze following the 1962 war, ambassador-level diplomatic relations were restored in 1976. This marked the first formal step toward normalization and signaled a mutual willingness to rebuild ties (Garver, 2011). It created the foundation for subsequent high-level exchanges and negotiations.

5.2 Rajiv Gandhi’s 1988 visit helped restart dialogue

A major breakthrough came with Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s visit to China in 1988. This visit is widely regarded as a turning point, as it initiated structured dialogue mechanisms and separated border disputes from broader bilateral cooperation (Fravel, 2008; Pant & Joshi, 2022). The visit established joint working groups and set the tone for sustained engagement despite unresolved disputes.

5.3 Agreements in 1993, 1996, 2005, and later talks aimed to maintain peace along the border

Several agreements have been signed to manage tensions along the LAC. The 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility and the 1996 Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures were particularly significant, as they introduced rules to prevent escalation (Fravel, 2008). The 2005 Political Parameters and Guiding Principles agreement further attempted to define a framework for resolving the boundary dispute (Garver, 2011). Subsequent mechanisms, including special representative talks and working-level dialogues, have continued this process (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Even after crises such as Doklam and Galwan, diplomatic engagement has remained active, demonstrating that both countries recognize the importance of dialogue in preventing escalation (Mohan, 2023). The effectiveness of these mechanisms has been questioned in light of recent tensions, indicating that diplomacy alone has not resolved underlying strategic competition.

6. Economic Cooperation

Economic relations between India and China present a complex picture of deep interdependence coexisting with strategic rivalry.

6.1 Trade grew rapidly after the 1990s



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Following India's economic liberalization in the 1990s, bilateral trade with China expanded significantly. Economic engagement became a central pillar of the relationship, with trade volumes increasing exponentially (Lall & Albaladejo, 2004; Kumar, 2020). This growth reflected complementary economic structures, with China serving as a manufacturing hub and India as a market.

6.2 China became one of India's major trading partners

By the 2010s, China had emerged as one of India's largest trading partners. Trade included a wide range of goods, from machinery and electronics to pharmaceuticals and raw materials (Kumar, 2020). Economic ties created mutual dependence, contributing to a degree of stability in the relationship despite political tensions (Mohan, 2023).

6.3 India faces a large trade deficit with China

A major challenge in economic relations is India's persistent trade deficit with China. India imports significantly more from China than it exports, leading to concerns about economic dependence and vulnerability (Lall & Albaladejo, 2004; Singh, 2021). This imbalance has prompted calls within India for diversification and domestic industrial development.

6.4 Economic ties continue despite political tension

Even during periods of heightened political and military tension, economic engagement has continued. For instance, trade did not collapse after the Galwan clash, indicating the resilience of economic interdependence (Kumar, 2020; Mohan, 2023). However, India has taken steps to restrict Chinese investments in sensitive sectors and promote self-reliance, reflecting a cautious approach (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Thus, economic cooperation remains both a stabilizing factor and a source of friction, highlighting the dual nature of India-China relations as simultaneously cooperative and competitive.

7. Strategic Competition

Strategic competition between India and China has become one of the defining features of their bilateral relationship in the 21st century. While both countries have managed periods of coexistence, their overlapping geopolitical ambitions increasingly generate friction.

7.1 China's close relationship with Pakistan worries India

China's long-standing strategic partnership with Pakistan is a central concern for India. This relationship extends beyond diplomatic support to include military cooperation, infrastructure development, and nuclear collaboration. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), passes through Pakistan-administered Kashmir, which India claims as its own territory. This not only raises sovereignty concerns but also deepens India's perception of encirclement, often described as a "two-front challenge" involving both China and Pakistan (Pant, 2019; Small, 2015).

7.2 India is concerned about China's Belt and Road Initiative and Indian Ocean presence

India views the BRI with skepticism, particularly due to its strategic implications. Projects such as ports in Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar) are perceived as potential dual-use facilities that could support China's naval presence in the Indian Ocean (Brewster, 2018). India fears that these developments could undermine its traditional influence in the region and threaten maritime security. Consequently, India has refused to formally join the BRI and has instead promoted alternative connectivity initiatives with partners like Japan and the United States (Garlick, 2020).

7.3 China is concerned about India's role in the Quad and Indo-Pacific strategy

From China's perspective, India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia—signals alignment with a broader strategy aimed at containing China's rise. The Indo-Pacific framework emphasizes freedom of navigation and regional balance, which Beijing often interprets as an attempt to limit its strategic space (Smith, 2021). India's increasing defense cooperation with Western powers, including joint military exercises, further heightens Chinese concerns about encirclement.

7.4 Both countries compete for influence in South Asia

South Asia has become a key arena of competition. China has expanded its economic and political footprint through infrastructure investments and development assistance, while India seeks to maintain its traditional leadership role in the region. Countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives have increasingly engaged both powers, sometimes leveraging their rivalry for economic gain (Mohan, 2020). This competition is not purely adversarial but reflects a broader contest for regional influence and legitimacy.

In sum, strategic competition between India and China is multidimensional, involving military, economic, and diplomatic elements. While not necessarily leading to open conflict, it shapes their interactions and limits trust, making cooperation more complex and conditional.



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8. Cooperation in Multilateral Forums

Despite their strategic rivalry, India and China have demonstrated a pragmatic ability to cooperate in multilateral settings where their interests converge. This duality reflects the complexity of their relationship.

8.1 India and China cooperate in BRICS, SCO, G20, and climate negotiations

India and China are key members of several international institutions, including BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the G20. Within these platforms, they collaborate on issues such as economic development, financial reform, and counterterrorism. For instance, both countries have supported initiatives within BRICS to strengthen the role of emerging economies in global governance (Stuenkel, 2017). In climate negotiations, they have often coordinated positions to advocate for the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities,” emphasizing the developmental needs of the Global South (Hurrell & Sengupta, 2012).

8.2 Both support a multipolar world order

A shared commitment to a multipolar global system is a significant point of convergence. Both India and China seek to reduce the dominance of Western powers, particularly the United States, in international institutions. This shared vision has facilitated cooperation in reforming global governance structures such as the United Nations and international financial institutions (Acharya, 2014). Their interpretations of multipolarity differ, with China often emphasizing its own leadership role, while India advocates for a more balanced distribution of power.

8.3 Cooperation exists where interests overlap

Pragmatic cooperation is most evident in areas where mutual benefits are clear. Trade remains a major aspect of their relationship, with China being one of India’s largest trading partners despite persistent imbalances (Mukherjee, 2020). Additionally, both countries collaborate on development issues, including poverty reduction and infrastructure financing, particularly within multilateral development banks like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Their engagement in global governance also reflects a shared interest in shaping international norms. Whether in digital governance, health cooperation, or economic recovery after global crises, India and China often find common ground, even while competing elsewhere (Zhao, 2019). Cooperation in multilateral forums highlights a pragmatic dimension of India–China relations. It demonstrates that despite deep-seated tensions, both countries recognize the value of collaboration in addressing global challenges.

9. Recent Developments

Recent developments in India–China relations reveal a shift toward heightened tension, followed by cautious efforts at stabilization.

9.1 After the Galwan crisis, relations became highly strained

The 2020 Galwan Valley clash marked a turning point in bilateral relations. It was the first deadly confrontation between the two countries in decades, resulting in casualties on both sides. The incident severely eroded trust and led to a sharp deterioration in diplomatic and military relations (Fravel, 2020). India responded by strengthening border infrastructure, restricting Chinese investments, and banning several Chinese digital applications. The crisis underscored the volatility of the border dispute and the risks of escalation.

9.2 Since 2024, both sides have taken steps toward disengagement and cautious normalization

In the years following the Galwan crisis, both countries engaged in multiple rounds of military and diplomatic talks aimed at disengagement along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). By 2024, there were signs of gradual de-escalation, with some troop withdrawals and agreements on buffer zones in contested areas (Singh, 2024). Normalization has been cautious and incomplete, as underlying tensions and mistrust persist. Both sides continue to maintain a significant military presence along the border.

9.3 Direct flights were set to resume after a five-year suspension

A notable indicator of limited diplomatic thaw has been the resumption of direct flights between India and China after a five-year suspension. This move reflects a willingness to restore people-to-people connectivity and economic exchanges, even amid unresolved strategic differences (Ministry of External Affairs, 2025). While symbolic, such steps suggest that both countries are exploring ways to stabilize relations without fundamentally altering their competitive posture.

In conclusion, recent developments illustrate a relationship in flux. The aftermath of the Galwan crisis has reinforced strategic distrust, yet both India and China appear to recognize the need for controlled engagement. Their interactions are likely to remain characterized by a mix of competition, cautious dialogue, and selective cooperation.

10. Conclusion



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India–China relations since 1960 reveal a complex mixture of conflict, cooperation, and strategic competition. The relationship has never been completely hostile, but it has also never become fully cooperative. The 1962 war left a lasting impact on political trust and public perception in both countries. Since then, border disputes have remained one of the most sensitive and unresolved issues. Although several agreements were signed to maintain peace along the Line of Actual Control, repeated tensions and military confrontations have shown that the border question continues to shape the overall relationship. At the same time, India and China have maintained diplomatic and economic engagement. Trade between the two countries has grown, and both have cooperated in international platforms such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and climate-related negotiations. These areas show that cooperation is possible when both countries identify common interests. However, economic cooperation has also created concerns, especially for India, because of the large trade imbalance and dependence on Chinese goods in several sectors. This has made economic relations both useful and problematic. Strategic rivalry is another major feature of India–China relations. China’s growing influence in South Asia, its close ties with Pakistan, and its activities in the Indian Ocean have increased India’s security concerns. Similarly, India’s closer relations with the United States, Japan, Australia, and other Indo-Pacific partners are viewed cautiously by China. As both countries rise as major Asian powers, competition for influence, security, markets, and regional leadership is likely to continue. The future of India–China relations depends on careful management rather than complete friendship or open confrontation. Peace along the border is the most important requirement for stability. Without border peace, trust and cooperation in other areas will remain limited. Balanced trade, regular diplomatic dialogue, crisis-management mechanisms, and mutual restraint are also necessary. If both countries avoid aggressive policies and respect each other’s core concerns, the relationship can remain stable despite differences. However, if mistrust, military competition, and nationalist pressures increase, tensions may become more difficult to control. Overall, India–China relations will continue to be defined by a cautious balance between cooperation and competition.

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