

Indo- China Relations Since 1991: Areas of Cooperation and Conflict

Amreen¹, Jyotika Teckchandani²

¹Masters Student, Amity Institute of Social Sciences, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India.

²Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Social Sciences, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

The Indo-China relationship since 1991 has been marked by a complex mix of cooperation and conflict, shaping regional security and economic dynamics. The normalization of diplomatic ties in the early 1990s paved the way for economic engagement, military confidence-building measures, and cultural exchanges. Bilateral trade has grown significantly, with China becoming one of India's largest trading partners. Strategic dialogues, border agreements, and collaborations in global forums like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) reflect efforts to enhance cooperation. However, persistent tensions over border disputes, including incidents like the Doklam standoff and the Galwan Valley clash, have hindered trust-building. China's increasing influence in South Asia through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has raised concerns in India, leading to strategic countermeasures such as the "Act East" policy and enhanced defense partnerships. The growing economic interdependence between the two nations stands in contrast to their geopolitical rivalry, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. This dissertation critically examines the evolving Indo-China relationship, analyzing areas of cooperation, sources of conflict, and their implications for regional stability. It explores diplomatic efforts, economic engagements, military confrontations, and strategic counterbalances to assess whether cooperation can outweigh competition in shaping future bilateral relations.

Keywords: Indo-China Relations, Border Disputes, Strategic Rivalry, Regional Security, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Act East Policy, Indo-Pacific, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Research Gap

While significant research exists on India-China relations, most studies tend to focus either on economic cooperation or strategic conflicts in isolation. However, there is limited research that holistically examines both cooperation and conflict together, particularly in the post-1991 period when diplomatic normalization led to increased economic interdependence alongside persistent military and geopolitical tensions. Furthermore, existing studies often emphasize specific events such as the 1962 war, the 2017 Doklam standoff, or the 2020 Galwan clash but do not comprehensively analyze how economic engagements, strategic competition, and regional influence shape the long-term trajectory of Indo-China relations. Additionally, while China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have been widely studied, India's strategic countermeasures, such as the "Act East Policy" and participation in QUAD, have not been analyzed in depth in the context of Indo-China relations. This

dissertation fills these gaps by examining both cooperation and conflict, integrating historical trends with contemporary developments, and assessing their implications for future regional stability.

Introduction

The relationship between China and India has been marked by both cooperation and conflict, and understanding its complexity is central to this dissertation. While both countries have often emphasized their historical ties and mutual friendship, the reality of their relationship is reactive, shaped by a contentious history and ongoing border disputes. Despite frequent public declarations of friendly relations, the past and present interactions between the two countries suggest a deeper strategic rivalry.

The primary focus of this research is to explore the nature of the relationship, which has evolved through multiple phases. In the 1950s, China and India aligned on anti-colonial goals, but a violent border war in 1962 created decades of tension. The 1990s brought improvements, particularly in economic cooperation and diplomatic exchanges, but significant border disputes, such as those in Arunachal Pradesh, have regularly disrupted peace efforts. This was particularly evident in the recent clashes in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, which have severely impacted trust between the two nations.

Both China and India are rising global powers with large populations, growing economies, and military capabilities. Despite their similarities, their relationship remains under-explored compared to other global rivalries, like that between China and the U.S. or India and Pakistan. A significant aspect of the competition between the two countries involves their influence over smaller neighboring states such as Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, where China's increasing involvement has caused concerns in India about strategic encirclement. In response, India has expanded its ties with Southeast Asia through its "Look East" policy.

The continuing border disputes, particularly the events of 2020 in Galwan Valley, have complicated efforts at building mutual trust and cooperation. Despite previous diplomatic efforts and high-level exchanges, the clashes and subsequent lack of resolution have led to a strained relationship, making it difficult to remain optimistic about future Sino-Indian relations.

This dissertation will further analyze these dynamics, focusing on how the historical context, ongoing conflicts, and economic cooperation shape the evolving relationship between China and India, and the broader implications for the region and global politics.

Evolution of the Indo-China Relations (1970 – 2020)

India and China's relationship saw ups and downs over the years, starting with efforts to restore ties in the 1970s after a long period of tension. In 1976, they resumed diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level, and efforts were made to improve ties, such as Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to China in 1979. However, this visit coincided with China's invasion of Vietnam, which strained relations. In the 1980s, tensions remained due to border issues, especially around Arunachal Pradesh, where India strengthened its military presence, leading to a brief standoff in 1987. Despite this, high-level diplomatic visits, such as Rajiv Gandhi's trip to China in 1988, helped stabilize relations, leading to agreements on cooperation in various fields and mechanisms to discuss border disputes.

The 1990s saw further diplomatic progress with visits by Indian and Chinese leaders, confidence-building measures along the border, and agreements on trade and environmental issues. However, China's military support to Burma raised concerns in India. In 1998, India's nuclear tests strained relations, as India's

defense minister openly labeled China as the biggest security threat. China criticized India's nuclear ambitions and supported Pakistan during the Kargil War in 1999.

The early 2000s marked a turning point, with China recognizing Sikkim as part of India and increasing economic cooperation. In 2004, India-China trade surpassed \$10 billion, and in 2005, China supported India's bid for a UN Security Council seat, though later took a neutral stance. In 2006, Nathula Pass was reopened for trade, but tensions resurfaced over Arunachal Pradesh, which China claimed as its own. Visa-related disputes in 2007-08 highlighted China's refusal to recognize Indian sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh. Despite this, bilateral visits and trade continued, with both nations discussing cooperation in technology, defense, and other sectors. In 2013, a military standoff occurred in Ladakh but was resolved diplomatically. However, tensions remained, as seen in China's opposition to Indian projects in Arunachal Pradesh. Modi's rise to power in 2014 initially brought positive engagements, with Xi Jinping's visit to India and Modi's return visit to China, highlighting strong diplomatic exchanges. However, the 2017 Doklam standoff created fresh tensions, with Indian and Chinese troops confronting each other over China's road construction in Bhutanese territory. After months of standoff, both sides disengaged, partly due to China's desire for a successful BRICS summit. In 2018, India and China agreed to work on joint projects in Afghanistan, signaling diplomatic cooperation.

However, China's broader regional strategy, including the "String of Pearls" policy—building naval bases around India—remained a strategic concern. China extended financial and military support to India's neighbors like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, attempting to reduce India's influence. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) remained a contentious issue, as it passed through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which India viewed as a violation of its sovereignty. Additionally, China's consistent opposition to India's permanent UN Security Council membership and its blocking of resolutions against Pakistani terrorists created further friction. China's growing influence in South Asia and support for anti-India elements continued to be a major challenge, shaping India-China relations as a complex mix of cooperation, competition, and strategic rivalry.

Areas of Cooperation

Despite historical conflicts and strategic rivalries, India and China have collaborated in multiple areas driven by economic interdependence, regional stability, and global governance. While tensions persist, their engagement in trade, climate change, cultural exchanges, and security dialogues serves as stabilizing factors in their complex relationship.

One of the most significant areas of cooperation is trade and economic relations. India and China have a robust trade relationship, with bilateral trade surpassing \$100 billion in recent years. China is India's largest trading partner, while India remains an important market for Chinese goods. However, India faces a significant trade deficit, leading to policy discussions on balancing trade. Dialogues such as the India-China Joint Economic Group (JEG) and the Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED) help manage trade relations and investment policies. Despite recent restrictions on Chinese investments in India due to security concerns, economic ties remain crucial for both nations.

India and China also engage in multilateral cooperation through organizations such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the G20, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). These platforms enable both nations to collaborate on economic development, financial policies, and security concerns. The BRICS Economic Framework has facilitated financial cooperation, while SCO dialogues have provided a space for discussing regional security. India and China also coordinate in global

financial policies through the G20, ensuring their interests are represented in international economic governance.

Another major area of collaboration is climate change and renewable energy. Both India and China are leaders in renewable energy production and have cooperated in various climate initiatives. The India-China Renewable Energy Cooperation Agreement (2015) focuses on developing solar and wind energy infrastructure. As part of the BRICS Energy Cooperation Roadmap, the two nations work together on green energy technologies. Additionally, both countries advocate for "common but differentiated responsibilities" in global climate negotiations, pushing for financial assistance for developing nations.

Cultural exchanges and people-to-people interactions have historically played a crucial role in India-China relations. Shared Buddhist heritage and historical trade routes have fostered strong cultural ties. The India-China Cultural Exchange Agreement (2013, renewed in 2019) encourages academic collaborations, artistic interactions, and linguistic exchanges. Confucius Institutes in India and Indian Cultural Centers in China promote mutual understanding. Additionally, Bollywood films such as *Dangal* and *Secret Superstar* have gained immense popularity in China, showcasing the power of cultural diplomacy. Religious tourism is another significant aspect, with the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra Agreement facilitating Indian pilgrimages to Tibet.

Science and technology cooperation is another important aspect of the bilateral relationship. India and China collaborate in areas such as AI research, space exploration, and biotechnology. The ISRO-CNSA (China National Space Administration) Space Cooperation Dialogue has facilitated discussions on peaceful space exploration. Moreover, under the BRICS Framework for Cooperation in Science, Technology, and Innovation, both countries engage in joint research projects. Although there is technological competition in areas such as 5G and semiconductor manufacturing, scientific exchanges continue under multilateral frameworks.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, India and China demonstrated health cooperation despite ongoing tensions. China supplied India with essential medical supplies, including PPE kits, oxygen concentrators, and pharmaceuticals. The BRICS Health Ministers' Meetings facilitated discussions on pandemic response strategies, while scientific collaborations on vaccines were explored. While geopolitical differences persisted, the pandemic underscored the importance of health diplomacy between the two nations.

Tourism and educational cooperation remain strong aspects of bilateral relations. Over 20,000 Indian students are enrolled in Chinese universities, particularly in medical programs. Agreements such as the Educational Exchange Program (EEP) have enabled student mobility between the two countries. Additionally, bilateral tourism agreements have facilitated travel, with a significant number of Chinese and Indian tourists visiting each other's countries before border tensions led to a decline in numbers.

Infrastructure development and connectivity projects have also seen collaboration, despite India's opposition to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Trade routes such as the Nathula Pass in Sikkim and the Lipulekh Pass in Uttarakhand facilitate cross-border commerce. Discussions on the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor continue as both nations explore connectivity in South Asia. While India remains skeptical of Chinese investments in strategic infrastructure, limited economic cooperation continues in regional transportation and logistics.

Counterterrorism remains a challenging but necessary area of cooperation. Although India and China have different positions on terrorism—especially concerning Pakistan—both countries participate in counterterrorism dialogues under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Regional Anti-Terrorist

Structure (RATS). Additionally, the BRICS Counterterrorism Working Group provides a multilateral platform for discussing global security threats. However, India's concerns over China's position on terrorism-related sanctions at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) remain a source of friction. Lastly, maritime cooperation has emerged as an area of engagement. Despite India's concerns over China's increasing influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), both nations hold bilateral maritime dialogues. The India-China Maritime Affairs Dialogue, last held in 2023, focuses on maritime security, freedom of navigation, and piracy prevention. India and China also interact through the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), exploring areas of maritime trade and ocean governance. While strategic competition exists, diplomatic engagements ensure that tensions do not escalate into direct conflict.

Areas of conflicts: Conflicts, Challenges, and Official Dialogues

India and China, the two largest economies in Asia and among the most populous nations in the world, share a relationship that is shaped by a mix of historical disputes, economic interdependence, and geopolitical competition. Their bilateral engagements are characterized by both conflict and cooperation, with multiple diplomatic frameworks aimed at fostering stability. However, a range of contentious issues—ranging from border disputes and military tensions to technological competition and regional influence—continue to create friction between the two nations. While both countries participate in global platforms like the United Nations (UN), BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), their diverging strategic interests and security concerns often bring them into conflict. The following analysis explores the key areas of disagreement and the official dialogues and agreements that have attempted to address these issues.

Border Disputes and Military Tensions

One of the most longstanding and serious disputes between India and China is their border conflict, particularly over the Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh regions. The origins of this dispute date back to the 1962 Sino-Indian War, which resulted in China occupying Aksai Chin while India retained control over Arunachal Pradesh. Despite multiple rounds of diplomatic and military negotiations, the boundary remains unresolved, leading to frequent tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The most significant military standoff in recent years occurred in Galwan Valley (2020), where violent clashes led to casualties on both sides—the first such fatalities in decades.

To address these border tensions, India and China have established a series of diplomatic mechanisms over the years, including the Special Representatives (SR) Dialogue on the Boundary Question (2003) and Corps Commander-level meetings (2020–present). Additionally, several agreements have been signed to prevent escalations, including the 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the LAC, the 1996 Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) in the Military Field, and the 2013 Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA). However, these agreements have been repeatedly tested by incidents such as the Doklam standoff (2017) and China's infrastructure buildup near disputed territories, making the border one of the most volatile aspects of India-China relations.

China-Pakistan Relations and India's Strategic Concerns

China's deepening strategic and military partnership with Pakistan remains a major concern for India. This relationship, often referred to as an "all-weather friendship," has resulted in Beijing providing economic aid, military equipment, and nuclear technology to Islamabad. The most contentious aspect of this

partnership is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). India has strongly opposed the project, arguing that it violates India's sovereignty. Despite India's protests at forums such as the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and the BRICS summits, China has continued to expand its investments in Pakistan, strengthening Islamabad's economic and military capabilities.

Diplomatic exchanges regarding China-Pakistan ties have taken place through platforms such as the India-China Strategic Dialogue (2017) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meetings. However, China's repeated blocking of India's efforts to designate Pakistan-based terrorists under the UN Security Council 1267 Sanctions Committee has further strained relations. In response, India has intensified its military modernization efforts, bolstered defense ties with countries like the United States, France, and Israel, and pursued alternative regional partnerships to counterbalance China's growing influence in South Asia.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Regional Influence in South Asia

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a global infrastructure project that aims to connect Asia, Africa, and Europe through a vast network of railways, highways, ports, and energy corridors. While many nations have joined the BRI, India has been a vocal critic, primarily due to concerns over sovereignty (CPEC runs through PoK), debt dependency, and China's geopolitical ambitions. To counter the BRI, India has launched alternative projects such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) (linking India, Iran, and Russia) and the recently announced India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

India has raised its concerns regarding BRI at platforms such as the G20 Summits, UNGA, and BRICS meetings. However, China's aggressive infrastructure expansion in Sri Lanka (Hambantota Port), Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Maldives has increased its influence in India's neighborhood. In response, India has increased its engagement with ASEAN, Japan, and Australia, using initiatives such as the Act East Policy to balance China's growing presence.

Technological Competition and Cybersecurity

Another area of growing tension is technological competition. China has established itself as a global leader in 5G technology, artificial intelligence (AI), semiconductors, and space technology, prompting India to reassess its technological dependencies. Following the 2020 Galwan clashes, India banned over 200 Chinese apps, including TikTok and WeChat, citing data security concerns. Additionally, India has restricted Huawei and ZTE from participating in its 5G network rollout, fearing potential espionage risks. Despite bilateral forums such as the India-China High-Level Economic and Trade Dialogue, India has increasingly aligned with Western nations on technological regulations. Cybersecurity threats have also heightened tensions, with Indian intelligence agencies accusing Chinese hackers of targeting Indian power grids and critical infrastructure. To mitigate risks, India has been expanding its domestic semiconductor industry and deepening partnerships with the US, Japan, and Taiwan.

China's Stance on Jammu & Kashmir and Diplomatic Disputes

China has consistently supported Pakistan's stance on Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) and has criticized India's 2019 revocation of Article 370, which revoked J&K's special status. Beijing raised the issue at the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2019 and 2020, aligning with Islamabad's position. India, in turn, has strongly

rejected China's statements, asserting that J&K is an internal matter and does not warrant international intervention.

India has repeatedly countered China's diplomatic moves at global platforms such as the UNGA, SCO Summits, and BRICS meetings. However, China's continued support for Pakistan on Kashmir, coupled with its military infrastructure development along the LAC, has contributed to growing regional tensions.

India's Participation in QUAD and Indo-Pacific Strategy

India's increasing involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)—which includes the US, Japan, and Australia—has further complicated its relationship with China. While India maintains that QUAD promotes a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific, Beijing perceives it as a strategic alliance aimed at countering China's influence. The Malabar Naval Exercises, held annually by QUAD members, have been viewed by China as a direct challenge to its dominance in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Official dialogues on QUAD and Indo-Pacific strategy have taken place through QUAD Summits (2021, 2022, and 2023) and the India-China Maritime Affairs Dialogue. However, tensions persist due to QUAD's increasing military cooperation and defense agreements, particularly India's growing ties with the US and Japan in maritime security.

India-China relations are shaped by a complex interplay of historical grievances, territorial disputes, strategic competition, and diplomatic engagements. While multiple bilateral and multilateral dialogues exist to manage tensions, fundamental differences remain unresolved. The two nations continue to compete for regional dominance, technological leadership, and global influence, making the future of their relationship uncertain. Effective diplomatic negotiations, confidence-building measures, and strategic foresight will be essential in determining whether the relationship stabilizes or deteriorates further.

Conclusion

India-China relations since 1991 have been characterized by a complex interplay of cooperation and conflict, reflecting both mutual economic interests and strategic competition. This dissertation has examined the evolution of bilateral ties, highlighting key areas of economic engagement, diplomatic collaboration, military tensions, and geopolitical rivalries. While both nations have made significant progress in trade, investment, cultural exchanges, and multilateral cooperation, unresolved border disputes, China's increasing presence in South Asia, and conflicting strategic objectives have created persistent friction in their relationship.

One of the most significant aspects of India-China relations is the growth of economic interdependence. Since the early 1990s, bilateral trade has expanded exponentially, making China one of India's largest trading partners. However, this economic engagement has also created concerns over trade imbalances, with India consistently running a large trade deficit with China. While initiatives such as the India-China Strategic Economic Dialogue have sought to address these concerns, India has taken protective measures, including restricting Chinese investments and banning Chinese technology firms in response to security threats. This underscores the dual nature of economic cooperation, where interdependence coexists with strategic caution.

Despite growing trade ties, border disputes remain the most contentious issue in India-China relations. The dissertation analyzed key military confrontations, including the Doklam standoff (2017) and Galwan Valley clash (2020), which underscored the fragile nature of peace along the Line of Actual Control

(LAC). Although both countries have signed agreements to maintain border stability, such as the 1993 and 1996 Peace Agreements, these have failed to prevent confrontations. China's aggressive border infrastructure development and India's military preparedness have intensified the rivalry, leading to continued military stand-offs and strategic distrust. These developments indicate that border tensions will remain a key destabilizing factor in bilateral relations unless both countries agree on a permanent resolution.

Another key area of conflict discussed in this dissertation is China's increasing influence in South Asia. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Beijing has expanded its economic and strategic footprint in India's immediate neighborhood. India perceives these developments as part of a larger strategy to contain its regional influence, leading to countermeasures such as the Act East Policy and enhanced defense cooperation with the US, Japan, and Australia. India's growing participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and Indo-Pacific alliances further reflects an effort to balance China's dominance in the region. These strategic moves highlight the geopolitical competition between the two nations, which extends beyond their borders into the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Multilateral engagements, however, provide an opportunity for cooperation. Both India and China are key players in global organizations such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the G20, where they have worked together on economic development, climate change, and global governance. However, even in these forums, competition persists, particularly in issues such as India's bid for a permanent UN Security Council seat and China's opposition to India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). While multilateral diplomacy offers a platform for dialogue, fundamental differences continue to limit deeper collaboration.

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