

Historical and Ongoing Hurdles in India-China Relations from 1947 to the Present, And Their Implications for Asia

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Abstract

India–China relations have undergone profound shifts from 1947 to the present, shaped by territorial disputes, ideological divergences, strategic competition, and shifting geopolitical alignments. Beginning with early post-independence cooperation and the spirit of *Panchsheel*, the relationship gradually deteriorated as border disagreements escalated into the 1962 war, followed by episodic clashes in 1967, 1975, 1986–95, 2017, and the violent Galwan Valley clash in 2020. The bilateral relationship has further been strained by competing nationalisms, China’s strategic partnership with Pakistan, India’s concerns regarding the Belt and Road Initiative and CPEC, trade imbalances, and rivalry in multilateral institutions. This paper historically traces the hurdles in India–China relations decade by decade and examines how these tensions affect Asia’s security, geopolitics, economic groupings, and regional alignments. Using historical data, diplomatic records, and secondary analyses, the study highlights that India–China relations remain characterized by deep mistrust and strategic competition, with significant implications for Asian stability, global power dynamics, and the future of the Indo-Pacific order.

Keywords: India–China Relations; Sino–Indian Conflict; Border Disputes; Panchsheel; Aksai Chin; McMahon Line; Doklam; Galwan Valley; CPEC; RCEP; Geopolitics of Asia; Regional Security; Tibet Issue; Global South; Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Introduction

The relationship between India and China—Asia’s two major civilizations and rising powers—has been one of the most influential and complex bilateral equations shaping modern Asian geopolitics. Since 1947, the trajectory of India–China ties has oscillated between early cooperation, intense hostility, cautious engagement, and renewed rivalry. The initial post-independence phase, symbolized by the slogan “*Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai*”, reflected shared anti-colonial sentiments and Nehru’s strong diplomatic outreach to the newly founded People’s Republic of China. The signing of the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement was viewed as a framework for peaceful coexistence and future partnership.

However, beneath this early optimism lay unresolved territorial disputes inherited from the colonial era—most notably over Aksai Chin in the western sector and the McMahon Line in the east. By 1959, tensions escalated after India granted asylum to the Dalai Lama, which China perceived as interference in its

sovereignty over Tibet. These unresolved border disagreements culminated in the 1962 Sino-Indian War, drastically altering the course of relations and embedding mistrust that endures to this day.

Over the following decades, relations witnessed cycles of conflict and conciliation. The clashes at Nathu La and Cho La in 1967, the 1975 ambush at Tulung La, and the prolonged Sumdorong Chu standoff in the 1980s served as reminders that the border remained volatile. The post-1990s era brought attempts at stabilization through confidence-building measures, increased trade, and high-level dialogues. Yet, at the same time, China's deepening ties with Pakistan, India's nuclear tests, and shifting regional dynamics fostered new layers of competition.

The 21st century has witnessed both unprecedented economic interdependence and intensified strategic rivalry. China's Belt and Road Initiative—especially the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor running through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir—has been a major source of concern for India. Meanwhile, India's participation in the Quad, its refusal to join RCEP in 2019, and periodic military standoffs including Doklam (2017) and the deadly Galwan Valley clash (2020) demonstrate the persistence of unresolved tensions.

These bilateral frictions extend beyond the border, influencing Asia's security architecture, economic alliances, and balance of power. Smaller South Asian nations increasingly find themselves navigating the competing influences of the two regional giants. Global institutions such as the United Nations, the SCO, BRICS, and G20 also serve as arenas for competition between India and China, as both vie for leadership of the Global South.

This research paper explores these dynamics in detail. It traces the historical evolution of India–China relations from 1947 to the present, examines key incidents shaping bilateral perceptions, analyzes diplomatic and economic disputes, and evaluates their broader implications for Asia. By doing so, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the hurdles that continue to define one of the most consequential bilateral relationships of the 21st century.

Hurdles in India–China Relations (1947–Present)

Major Hurdles

1950s

India and China signed the 1954 Panchsheel Treaty on Tibet (covering trade and intercourse) to formalize friendship (*Agreement on Trade and Intercourse With Tibet Region*, 1954), but disagreements persisted. Both governments inherited conflicting colonial maps (e.g. over Assam/Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin) (“India-China Border Tensions: Key Dates in Decades-Long Conflict,” 2020). In 1959 the Tibetan uprising and Dalai Lama's flight to India sharply worsened relations. By 1960 there were serious border skirmishes and stalled talks.

1960s

The watershed event was the 1962 Sino-Indian War (see below), which left India demoralized and shrank its Himalayan frontier. In 1967 China and India briefly clashed again at Nathu La and Cho La passes in Sikkim: Indian troops repelled the PLA's attack (India reported ~80 killed vs ~400 PLA casualties) (“India-China Border Tensions: Key Dates in Decades-Long Conflict,” 2020). These clashes convinced Delhi to fortify its posts, and China thereafter avoided large-scale assaults.

1970s

After 1967 both sides largely froze the status quo. A minor clash in 1975 (the Tulung La ambush in Arunachal) was the last reported firing of that era. The two countries began modest confidence-building:

for example, in 1976 they agreed on Panchsheel principles at the Bandung Conference. But India's 1974 nuclear test drew Chinese criticism (New Delhi's bomb was said to violate the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty) and discouraged high-level summits until the 1980s.

1980s

Tensions flared again in the mid-1980s. In 1986–87, India and China faced a Sumdorong Chu standoff in Arunachal Pradesh, where PLA troops moved into a valley claimed by India. Over nine years India and China negotiated a phased withdrawal (completed by 1995) (Aggarwal, 2020). Notwithstanding this, the period also saw new diplomatic engagement: India's 1988 visit to Beijing (by External Affairs Minister Vajpayee) reopened dialogue. By 1990 both governments had begun to resume border talks and reach compromise in less-sensitive areas.

1990s

The 1990s brought partial thawing. In 1993 and 1996 the two sides signed *border confidence-building measures* (CBMs) to reduce soldier clashes and clarify the "Line of Actual Control" (Bajpae, 2025). However, India's 1998 nuclear tests prompted Chinese condemnation (China accused India of expanding the regional arms race). The 1999 Kargil conflict (with Pakistan) saw China urge restraint on both sides. By the late 1990s, economic ties were growing despite these frictions (bilateral trade grew steadily).

2000s

The 2000s featured a mix of cooperation and rivalry. In 2005 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Hu Jintao declared an India–China Strategic and Cooperative Partnership, promising new high-level mechanisms for dialogue. Still, disputes remained. China's 2008 recognition of Sikkim as an Indian state (disputed by some Indian nationalists) caused irritation, and Beijing objected to Indian development aid in Tibet/Arunachal. During this decade both countries participated in multilateral forums (BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation), but bilateral trust remained low.

2010s

Economic and strategic competition intensified. China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, with its flagship China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) running through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir – a scheme India vocally opposed (Daly, 2014,). Bilateral trade boomed (China became India's one of the largest trading partners) but India ran a large deficit, fueling complaints of "market dumping." In 2017 a 72-day standoff at Doklam (Bhutan tri-junction) became the biggest military face-off since 1962 (see below). By 2019 India refused to join the China-led RCEP trade pact, citing fears of a flood of Chinese imports (Tostevin, 2019). Throughout the decade, India also lodged protests at Chinese customs offices and international fora over Beijing's mapping of Indian territory (like Arunachal Pradesh as "South Tibet").

2020s

Tensions peaked again in 2020. In June 2020 India reported 20 soldiers killed in a brawl with Chinese troops at Galwan Valley (Ladakh), triggering the first combat deaths on the border since 1975. In response Delhi banned scores of Chinese mobile apps (e.g. TikTok, WeChat) on security grounds (Phartiyal, 2021). By late 2021 both sides had disengaged from most hotspots, and in October 2024 they announced a new "guardrail" border agreement to prevent accidental clashes (Bajpae, 2025). But underlying issues (territorial claims, regional influence) remain unresolved, and periodic border incidents continue in areas like Pangong Tso and Arunachal Pradesh.

Major Incidents

1962 Sino-Indian War

In October–November 1962 a full-scale war erupted along the Himalayan border. China launched a surprise offensive in Ladakh (capturing Aksai Chin) and in the North-East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh). Within weeks Chinese forces had overrun key Indian positions. India suffered heavy casualties and retreated; in late November China declared a unilateral ceasefire and pulled back to pre-war lines. The war's impact was profound: India lost administrative control of Aksai Chin (key plateau linking Tibet and Xinjiang) and felt strategically humiliated. Analysts note that “the war marked the end of the Nehruvian era” in Indian policy – it forced Delhi to rearm aggressively and shed much of its earlier idealism (Lidarev, 2022). Delhi's defence spending jumped (from ~2% of GDP to over 4% within two years) and India launched major military reforms and even nuclear weapons development partly in reaction to 1962 (Lidarev, 2022). The border remains officially unsettled: China still occupies Aksai Chin, while India holds the eastern sector.

1967 Nathu La and Cho La Clashes

In September–October 1967 Indian and Chinese troops exchanged artillery and small-arms fire at two Sikkim border passes (Nathu La and Cho La). This time India had fortified its positions rigorously. According to New Delhi, about 80 Indian soldiers were killed and up to 400 Chinese casualties occurred in the Nathu La battles (“India-China Border Tensions: Key Dates in Decades-Long Conflict,” 2020). (Independent estimates vary, but it was clearly a bloody encounter.) These clashes effectively halted Chinese advances in that sector. Although it was a short, localized fight, the outcome bolstered Indian military morale and convinced Beijing to avoid further large-scale confrontations along the Sikkim border for decades.

Sumdorong Chu Standoff (1986–1995)

In mid-1986 India discovered Chinese troops building a helipad in the Sumdorong Chu area of Arunachal Pradesh. New Delhi lodged a protest, but China denied any incursion. Over the summer hundreds of Indian soldiers were sent to the valley to block the PLA's advance. For nearly nine years the two armies faced off across the line of actual control. After several rounds of talks, the 1995 joint statement led to phased disengagement: China agreed to vacate newly constructed positions, and India toned down its summer patrols (Aggarwal, 2020). The Sumdorong Chu episode demonstrated how even in a “peaceful” era, minor border intrusions could spiral into long-term standoffs. It also showed that improved communications (1980s satellite era) and diplomacy could eventually avert direct war, paving the way for the late-1990s CBMs.

Doklam Plateau Standoff (2017)

In June 2017, Indian troops intervened on Bhutan's behalf when China's PLA began extending a road towards the India-Bhutan-China tri-junction at Doklam (near India's Siliguri “chicken's neck”). The two sides maintained troops for 72 days in this high-altitude stand-off. Indian strategists feared the road would allow China to sever India's Northeast link; China insisted it was constructing infrastructure on its side of the border. After intense diplomacy, on 28 August both governments agreed to “expeditious disengagement” – China halted roadwork and India withdrew its patrol. While no shots were fired, Doklam was a major test of wills. India was widely seen as having defended Bhutan's security (and its own strategic flank), but Beijing emerged asserting its territorial claims. The incident strained ties, led India to block Chinese participation in some regional projects (e.g. it skipped the 2017 BRICS summit in China), and highlighted the Bhutan factor in India-China ties.

Galwan Valley Clash (2020)

On 15–16 June 2020, Indian and Chinese patrols clashed violently in Galwan Valley (Ladakh) after weeks of patrol face-offs. Officially India reported 20 soldiers killed (several more wounded). China admitted casualties but gave no number (external reports estimated 40–50 PLA troops killed). The fighting involved melee with sticks and stones at night in freezing mountain terrain – the first lethal combat on the border since 1975. The Galwan clash dramatically shattered the existing peace: it led India to suspend all military and official talks, postpone diplomatic visits, and freeze commerce. China and India both reinforced thousands of troops along the LAC in summer 2020. Regionally, it alarmed other Asian neighbors and prompted India to deepen security ties with the United States, Japan and Australia (Quad). Domestically, India retaliated by banning around 200 Chinese mobile apps and tightening investment rules. The clash remains an acute symbol of distrust in the bilateral relationship.

Diplomatic and Trade Disputes

United Nations and Global Governance

India aspires to a permanent UN Security Council seat and greater clout in international affairs, but China – already a veto-wielding power – has been reluctant to fully back this. Official joint statements typically say China “understands and supports India’s aspirations to play a greater role in the United Nations” (including the Security Council) (Kaura, 2015), but in practice Beijing has withheld affirmative commitment. This diplomatic stand-off extends to other forums: China has blocked India’s entry into elite export-control regimes (e.g. the Nuclear Suppliers Group) by citing NPT rules, and disputes India’s claims at UN maritime bodies. Similarly, India has sometimes opposed Chinese initiatives at international summits if they conflict with its interests (for example, India skipped or distanced itself from some Belt and Road forums where its territorial concerns were ignored). Overall, competition at the UN and in global institutions remains a diplomatic hurdle, as neither side wants the other to gain disproportionate influence.

Tibet Issue and the Dalai Lama

Tibet is a perennial sore point. India’s decision to host the Dalai Lama (and the Tibetan government-in-exile) since 1959 has long angered Beijing. Even routine activities – like the Dalai Lama’s overseas visits or meetings with foreign leaders – provoke Chinese protests. In 2008 violent unrest in Tibet led to bitter exchanges with India over media coverage. More recently, the question of the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation has created fresh controversy: in 2023 the Dalai Lama said his successor “will be of this culture, by this culture” (implying outside Chinese control), and China quickly responded that it alone has the right to approve the next Dalai figure (Bajpae, 2025). Such incidents keep Tibet alive as a bilateral dispute. At the same time, both governments claim Tibet (China as its province, India as part of “Tibet administration”) and neither recognizes the other’s version of the Himalayan border there. In sum, the Tibet question feeds mutual mistrust and occasionally derails other talks.

China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

Launched in 2015, CPEC is the flagship route of China’s Belt and Road, running from Xinjiang through Pakistan to the Arabian Sea. Crucially, much of CPEC runs through Gilgit–Baltistan (Pakistan-occupied Kashmir). India has never recognized Pakistani or Chinese claims to that region, and in 2013–14 officially protested the corridor at the UN and in bilateral meetings (Daly, 2014). New Delhi warns that CPEC violates India’s sovereignty. Beijing has offered diplomatic assurances (saying CPEC boundaries are “resolved” by China-Pakistan agreements) (Daly, 2014), but Indian analysts remain skeptical. In practice, CPEC has widened the India–China rivalry zone: it cements China’s strategic foothold near Kashmir, and

has led India to deepen its own projects with Afghanistan and Iran (e.g. the Chabahar Port) to counterbalance Chinese influence.

Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)

RCEP is a 15-member free-trade pact led by ASEAN and including China, Japan, Korea, Australia and New Zealand. India joined negotiations but on 4 November 2019 withdrew at the last minute. Delhi cited the risk of “cheap goods from China” flooding its market and exacerbating trade deficits (Tostevin, 2019). In Chinese eyes, India’s exit was a disappointment after 7 years of talks, but it allowed RCEP to be concluded in 2020 without India. For India, the refusal to join (over China concerns) underscores the cautious, protectionist tilt in its trade policy. Economically, the snub slows deeper India–East Asia integration; politically, it signals that India will not easily enter China-led economic blocs without safeguards.

Digital Sector and Technology Bans

Since 2020 India has targeted Chinese tech companies on national-security grounds. In June 2020, New Delhi banned dozens of Chinese apps (including TikTok, WeChat, Baidu, UC Browser, etc.) “prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity” of India (Phartiyal, 2021). The move followed the Galwan clash and was explicitly justified as a security response. Similar bans occurred in 2019–21. India has also tightened screening of Chinese investments, and restricted equipment from Chinese telecom firms (Huawei, ZTE) in certain sensitive projects. These measures have not only reduced Chinese firms’ access to the Indian market but have also fed Chinese discontent. Beijing accuses India of unfair practices, while many Indian officials see China’s dominance in 5G and digital infrastructure as a strategic threat. Thus, the tech sector has become another theater of rivalry and protectionism, compounding the trade conflicts of goods.

Implications for Asia

Regional Security Dynamics

The India–China rivalry casts a long shadow over Asian security. The two populous nuclear powers both assert regional claims (China over the South China Sea, India over the Indian Ocean region) and sometimes see each other’s actions through a security lens. As Chatham House analysts note, issues of sovereignty (Tibet for China, Kashmir/Arunachal for India) are “at the heart of both countries’ difficult relationship” (Bajpae, 2025). China’s reluctance to treat India as an equal power – viewing India as a “pawn” in its competition with the US – creates a persistent security dilemma (Bajpae, 2025). In response, both nations have bolstered military capabilities along their borders: India has built new air bases and acquired advanced weapons, while China has rapidly expanded road, rail and air links in Tibet. Their rivalry also influences other Asian states. Countries like Nepal and Bhutan have faced pressure from China (e.g. mapping disputes, infrastructure projects) precisely because India is their traditional security partner. Meanwhile, India has renewed defense cooperation with the US, Japan and Australia (the Quad) partly to balance China’s rise. In sum, Sino-Indian tensions are a central factor in Asia’s security architecture, prompting both alliance-building and arms acquisitions.

Economic Blocs and Trade Relations

Competition between India and China helps shape Asia’s economic architecture. China leads the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and is promoting its Belt and Road corridors. India, wary of Chinese economic clout, has instead pushed initiatives like the Bay of Bengal Initiative and free trade agreements with the Gulf/East Asia outside China’s orbit. For example, India’s withdrawal from RCEP (Tostevin, 2019) and its caution toward BRI

projects signal a diverging path from China-dominated blocs. At the same time, their bilateral trade remains enormous: China is India's largest trading partner, but India runs a huge deficit. India has pressed for greater market access (e.g. in pharmaceuticals and IT) in China, often with limited success. These economic frictions feed into regional trade politics: many Southeast Asian and Central Asian countries try to balance investments from both powers. Overall, Asia's trade and connectivity initiatives often split into a China-led camp and an India-aligned camp, reflecting their rivalry.

Influence in the Global South

Both countries aspire to lead the Global South, and their rivalry reverberates in Africa, Latin America and multilateral forums. China's vast investments in African infrastructure and Latin American mining have at times overshadowed India's more modest development partnerships. India counters by emphasizing democratic development aid, training programs and soft-power (Bollywood, cultural diplomacy). In forums like BRICS, G20, and the UN, India and China sometimes collaborate (e.g. on climate or trade reform) but also compete for leadership of non-Western consensus. As one analyst observes, India and China share a "civilizational state" outlook and often speak of themselves as co-leaders of the Global South (Bajpae, 2025). Yet, they are not coordinating with each other; rather, both try to court smaller countries individually. For instance, during the 2024 Gaza conflict both sought to rally Muslim-majority and developing countries to their perspective. Their rivalry thus partly frustrates a united "Third World" stance, and developing countries often find themselves choosing sides or hedging between these Asian giants.

Effects on Neighboring States

India's neighbors find themselves caught in the China-India contest. Bhutan has relied on India for security (as in the 2017 Doklam episode), but China's overtures (border talks with Thimphu) create uncertainty. Nepal has traditionally balanced ties, but recent governments have tilted toward Beijing (joining BRI and building China-funded infrastructure), worrying New Delhi. Sri Lanka and the Maldives have attracted huge Chinese investment (ports, airports), prompting India to increase its own diplomatic and economic engagement with them. In Bangladesh and Myanmar, both India and China are building roads, railways and energy projects, often bidding for influence. In sum, Indo-China rivalry contributes to a pattern of "balancing" among Asian states. Many smaller countries seek economic deals with both, or use India-China competition to their advantage. Security arrangements like the Quad and new Asian forums partly arise as counterweights to Chinese influence, in which India plays a leading role. The enduring competition between India and China thus reshapes alliances and alignments across Asia, ensuring that regional geopolitics will continue to be defined by their uneasy coexistence (Bajpae, 2025).

Timeline of Events

- 1947 – British India partitioned; India becomes independent, inherits undefined border with China (Tibet and Aksai Chin) .
- 1949 – Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China; initially cordial relations.
- 1950 – India recognizes PRC (April); Zhou Enlai visits India; Panchsheel principles emerge.
- 1954 – India and China sign a treaty on trade with Tibet (the Panchsheel Treaty).
- 1959 – Tibetan uprising; Dalai Lama flees to India. Nehru visits Beijing and disputes map relations deteriorate.
- 1962 – Sino-Indian War (Oct–Nov); China defeats India along the frontier and retains Aksai Chin.
- 1967 – Nathu La/Cho La clashes (Sept–Oct); India repels PLA (hundreds killed)
- 1975 – Last deadly border clash (Tulung La ambush); after this both sides largely cease firing.

- 1987 – Sumdorong Chu standoff begins in Arunachal Pradesh (drawn out to 1995).
- 1993–96 – Border Confidence Building Measures signed (no first use of force; joint mechanism to resolve incidents).
- 1998 – India conducts nuclear tests (Pokhran-II); China condemns.
- 1999 – India–Pakistan Kargil War; China calls for ceasefire, reaffirms friendship with Pakistan.
- 2005 – China and India upgrade ties to a Strategic and Cooperative Partnership; Annual Summit mechanism begins.
- 2008 – Beijing hosts Olympics; Chinese flights display maps showing Arunachal as “South Tibet,” sparking Indian objections.
- 2017 – Doklam stand-off (June–August); 72-day Himalayan military standoff (see above).
- 2019 – India withdraws from RCEP free-trade agreement (Nov).
- 2020 – Galwan Valley clash (June); first combat deaths on border since 1975. India bans many Chinese apps (June–Oct).
- 2021 – New military disengagement (Feb) in eastern Ladakh (Patrolling Point 17).
- 2024 – China and India announce a border “guardrail” agreement (Oct) and recommence diplomatic engagement.

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