

Sino-India Relations During Modi's Regime: Shifting Patterns of Cooperation and Conflict

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Abstract

Sino-Indian relations during the regime of Prime Minister Narendra Modi mark a significant phase in the evolution of bilateral ties, characterized by the concurrent presence of engagement and strategic competition. This study analyses the changing patterns of cooperation and conflict between India and China since 2014, placing them within the broader context of unresolved boundary disputes, shifting regional power equations, and recalibrated foreign policy priorities. Using a qualitative and analytical approach grounded in secondary sources, the research draws primarily on realist theory to interpret state behaviour amid strategic uncertainty and power asymmetry. The paper contends that although the Modi government initially prioritized diplomatic outreach and economic interaction, recurring border crises and deepening mistrust progressively reshaped India's approach toward a more cautious and security-oriented framework. The findings suggest that contemporary Sino-Indian relations cannot be reduced to either partnership or hostility; instead, they reflect a condition of strategic ambivalence. India's China policy demonstrates continuity in preserving strategic autonomy, alongside a more assertive posture in response to emerging security challenges. The study concludes that rivalry is likely to persist as the dominant feature of the relationship, with limited cooperation serving primarily as a stabilizing mechanism within an increasingly competitive Asian order.

Keywords: Strategic Rivalry, Border Disputes, Regional Security, Balance of Power.

1. Introduction

Sino-Indian relations constitute one of the most consequential bilateral relationships in contemporary Asian geopolitics. As two ancient civilizations and emerging powers, India and China share a long history of cultural interaction, yet their modern political relationship has been shaped largely by mistrust, unresolved disputes, and competing strategic ambitions (Maxwell, 1970). Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1950, bilateral ties have oscillated between periods of cautious cooperation and intense confrontation, most notably following the 1962 border conflict (Garver, 2016). The absence of a clearly demarcated boundary and divergent perceptions of territorial sovereignty have remained central sources of tension, continuing to influence mutual threat perceptions.

Despite these structural challenges, the post-Cold War period witnessed efforts by both countries to stabilize relations through confidence-building measures, economic engagement, and diplomatic dialogue. Trade expanded significantly, and institutional mechanisms were created to manage border disputes and

enhance political communication (Bajpae & Yu, 2025). However, this engagement did not resolve underlying strategic contradictions, particularly as both states began to assert their interests more forcefully within the evolving Asian power structure.

The advent of Narendra Modi's leadership in 2014 marked an important phase in India's approach towards China. Initially characterized by diplomatic outreach and high-level engagement, this period soon revealed the limits of cooperative gestures in the face of persistent security dilemmas. Incidents such as the Doklam standoff and the Galwan Valley clash underscored the fragility of existing arrangements and brought the border issue back to the centre of bilateral relations. Simultaneously, growing Chinese influence in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific intensified Indian concerns regarding strategic encirclement and regional balance (Scott, 2018).

The significance of Sino-Indian relations extends beyond bilateral interactions, as both countries play crucial roles in shaping regional stability and global governance. Their relationship affects the security architecture of Asia, the functioning of multilateral institutions, and the broader balance of power in the international system. Understanding the shifting patterns of cooperation and conflict during Modi's regime is therefore essential for analysing not only India-China relations but also the future trajectory of Asian geopolitics. This study seeks to contribute to this understanding by examining how engagement and rivalry coexist and evolve under changing strategic conditions.

1.1 Rationale of the Study

The decision to focus on the tenure of Narendra Modi as the scope of this study arises from its relevance in explaining contemporary shifts in Sino-Indian relations. Since 2014, India's approach toward China has demonstrated a gradual recalibration, combining diplomatic engagement with increased strategic caution. In this phase, elements of cooperation and tension have emerged simultaneously and more visibly than in previous periods. At the beginning of the administration, emphasis was placed on high-level political dialogue and leader-centric diplomacy to maintain stable bilateral ties. Nevertheless, these initiatives unfolded amid enduring structural challenges, particularly the unresolved border dispute and intensifying regional competition. Events such as the Doklam standoff and the Galwan Valley clash revealed the limitations of existing confidence-building arrangements and reinforced security concerns, making this period important for analysing evolving patterns of cooperation and rivalry.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Sino-Indian relations reflect a persistent combination of cooperation and strategic tension. Despite expanded diplomatic engagement, economic exchanges, and collaboration in multilateral forums, unresolved structural issues—particularly the boundary dispute and regional power competition—continue to constrain trust (Malik, 2004). This dynamic has intensified during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure. Initial high-level diplomacy created expectations of improved stability; however, border crises such as Doklam and Galwan revealed the fragility of existing confidence-building mechanisms and deepened strategic suspicion. These events significantly influenced India's security perceptions and policy orientation toward China. At the same time, selective cooperation in economic and institutional domains has continued. The coexistence of engagement and rivalry highlights the need for a multidimensional analysis of political, strategic, and economic factors shaping contemporary Sino-Indian relations and their broader regional implications.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To examine the overall trajectory of Sino-Indian relations during the regime of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, with specific reference to patterns of cooperation and conflict.

2. To analyze the political, strategic, and economic factors that have influenced India–China relations since 2014.
3. To assess the impact of border disputes and security concerns on the bilateral relationship during Modi’s tenure.
4. To evaluate the nature and extent of cooperation between India and China in multilateral forums despite increasing strategic rivalry.
5. To study the shifts in India’s China policy under Modi’s leadership in response to changing regional and global power dynamics.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How have Sino-Indian relations evolved during the regime of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in terms of cooperation and conflict?
2. What are the key political, strategic, and economic factors shaping the shifting patterns of engagement and rivalry between India and China since 2014?
3. To what extent have border disputes and security concerns influenced the overall trajectory of Sino-Indian relations under Modi’s leadership?
4. How has India’s foreign policy approach towards China changed during Modi’s regime in response to China’s growing regional and global influence?
5. What are the broader implications of these shifting patterns of cooperation and conflict for regional stability and the Asian balance of power?

1.5 Scope of the Study

The present study focuses on Sino-Indian relations during the regime of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, covering the period from 2014 onwards. It examines the shifting patterns of cooperation and conflict between India and China by analysing political, strategic, and economic dimensions of the bilateral relationship. Particular emphasis is placed on border-related tensions, diplomatic engagements, and India’s evolving foreign policy approach towards China. The study also considers areas of selective cooperation in multilateral forums such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, as these platforms highlight the coexistence of rivalry and engagement in Sino-Indian relations. The research adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based on secondary sources, including academic journals, books, official statements, policy documents, and credible think-tank reports. By applying a realist theoretical perspective, the study aims to explain how power asymmetries, security concerns, and regional competition shape bilateral interactions. The scope further extends to examining the broader regional implications of India–China relations, particularly in the context of the Indo-Pacific and Asian balance of power.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

Despite its comprehensive approach, the study has certain limitations. First, it relies primarily on secondary data due to constraints in accessing official or classified policy deliberations, which may limit insights into internal decision-making processes. Second, the study does not undertake a detailed quantitative analysis of trade or military data, focusing instead on qualitative interpretation. Third, while the Modi regime is treated as a distinct phase, the long-term historical and domestic political factors influencing Chinese policy are addressed only to the extent relevant to the research objectives. Finally, the rapidly evolving nature of Sino-Indian relations means that recent developments may alter certain assessments over time.

2. Review of Literature

Scholarly literature on Sino-Indian relations underscores the enduring complexity of interactions between the two Asian powers, rooted primarily in historical grievances and strategic mistrust. Early studies focus extensively on the legacy of the 1962 border conflict, identifying it as a foundational rupture that reshaped bilateral perceptions and security policies. Neville Maxwell (1970) and John Garver (2016) argue that the unresolved boundary question institutionalized suspicion and entrenched adversarial strategic thinking on both sides. These works provide crucial historical grounding but largely remain confined to conflict-centric explanations.

In the post-Cold War period, academic attention increasingly shifted toward engagement and economic interdependence. Scholars such as Mohan Malik (2004) and Alastair Iain Johnston (2012) suggest that expanding trade ties, diplomatic dialogue, and confidence-building measures contributed to relative stability from the 1990s onwards. Agreements aimed at maintaining peace along the Line of Actual Control are often cited as evidence of pragmatic cooperation. However, this strand of literature frequently assumes that economic engagement would gradually reduce strategic tensions—an assumption that later developments have challenged.

More recent studies question the effectiveness of engagement in the context of China's growing power. Analysts such as Ashley J. Tellis (2020) and C. Raja Mohan (2017) emphasize that widening power asymmetries and China's assertive regional posture have intensified strategic competition. Literature focusing on border standoffs highlights how infrastructure development and military modernization have reinforced the security dilemma, despite formal agreements intended to prevent escalation (Fravel, 2020). Scholarship specifically examining Modi's regime presents mixed assessments. Some studies stress continuity in India's foreign policy, particularly its emphasis on strategic autonomy and dialogue (Pant & Rej, 2018). Others argue that Modi's tenure reflects a clearer acknowledgment of China as a strategic competitor, prompting policy recalibration and regional balancing (Tellis, 2020). However, much of this literature treats cooperation and conflict as separate phenomena rather than interconnected dynamics. This study contributes to existing scholarship by integrating these dimensions within a realist analytical framework, offering a comprehensive explanation of the coexistence of cooperation and rivalry in Sino-Indian relations during Modi's regime.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach to examine the evolving patterns of cooperation and conflict in Sino-Indian relations during the tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. As the research focuses on foreign policy behaviour, strategic perceptions, and diplomatic interactions, a qualitative framework is appropriate for understanding the complexity of interstate relations and policy developments. The analysis relies primarily on secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, UGC-CARE listed publications, government documents, policy papers, and reports from recognized think tanks. Official speeches, joint statements, and declarations by Indian and Chinese authorities are also analysed to interpret policy orientations and diplomatic positions. Selected reports from credible media outlets are used to contextualize recent developments. The study applies descriptive, interpretative, and content analysis to examine key events and policy decisions, while realist theory provides the analytical framework for evaluating developments from 2014 onward.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Realism as its principal analytical lens to interpret Sino-Indian relations during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure. Rooted in the assumption of an anarchic international system, realism posits that states prioritize survival, security, and national interest amid persistent uncertainty (Waltz, 1979). Within this framework, the enduring rivalry between India and China is viewed as a structural outcome of power asymmetry, unresolved territorial disputes, and mutual suspicion regarding long-term strategic intentions. Continued military preparedness despite diplomatic engagement reflects the logic of self-help central to realist thought. The concept of the security dilemma is particularly relevant in explaining recurring tensions. Defensive measures such as infrastructure expansion and force mobilization along the border are often perceived as offensive threats, generating countermeasures and reinforcing mistrust (Jervis, 1978). Additionally, balance-of-power dynamics illuminate India's efforts to respond to China's growing capabilities through regional partnerships and strategic diversification (Tellis, 2020). Although liberal institutionalism and constructivism offer insights into economic interdependence and identity-based perceptions (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Acharya, 2014), they inadequately account for persistent conflict. Consequently, realism provides the most coherent explanation of the strategic competition shaping contemporary Sino-Indian relations.

5. Historical Overview of Sino-Indian Relations

The trajectory of Sino-Indian relations before 2014 illustrates a complex interaction of historical experiences, strategic suspicion, and intermittent attempts at cooperation. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, India was among the earliest states to extend diplomatic recognition to the new government. In the initial years, bilateral relations were characterized by a spirit of optimism and solidarity between two newly emerging Asian states. This cooperative outlook was reflected in the articulation of the Panchsheel Principles during the 1950s, which emphasized peaceful coexistence and mutual respect for sovereignty (Garver, 2016). Nevertheless, these early aspirations gradually weakened as disagreements over territorial boundaries and broader strategic interests began to surface.

A major rupture in the relationship occurred with the Sino-Indian War, which fundamentally altered the political and security perceptions of both countries. The conflict exposed deep mistrust and entrenched the border dispute as the central issue in bilateral relations. In particular, the lack of a clearly defined boundary, especially along the Line of Actual Control, remained a continuing source of friction. Although diplomatic relations were gradually restored in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the boundary question remained unresolved, influencing military deployments and strategic thinking on both sides (Fravel, 2020).

From the early 1990s onward, new opportunities for engagement emerged as India initiated economic reforms and China became increasingly integrated into the global economy. During this period, trade between the two countries expanded significantly, reflecting growing economic interdependence. Both governments also sought to stabilize the relationship through a series of agreements and dialogue mechanisms intended to preserve peace along the disputed border. Confidence-building arrangements and institutional frameworks were introduced to reduce the risk of escalation, although these initiatives primarily focused on managing tensions rather than addressing the fundamental sources of disagreement (Pant & Mankikar, 2024).

Consequently, the years preceding the leadership of Narendra Modi were marked by a dual pattern of engagement combined with strategic caution. While economic exchanges and diplomatic contacts increased, underlying mistrust remained, particularly in light of China's growing influence in South Asia

and India's concerns about shifting regional power dynamics (Mohan, 2020). Periodic border incidents and political disagreements highlighted the fragile nature of bilateral stability. This mixture of cooperation and latent rivalry created a complicated foundation that shaped the evolution of relations during Modi's tenure, making the pre-2014 phase crucial for understanding subsequent developments in Sino-Indian relations.

6. Areas of Cooperation during Modi's Regime

Although strategic tensions have remained a defining feature of Sino-Indian relations, the period of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership has also seen continuous attempts to sustain cooperation in areas such as diplomacy, trade, and multilateral engagement. These forms of interaction illustrate the pragmatic dimension of the relationship, where both countries have attempted to balance competition with dialogue in order to prevent rivalry from completely overshadowing avenues for collaboration (Pant, 2020; Garver, 2016). Diplomatic engagement, particularly at the leadership level, played an important role in maintaining communication during the early years of Modi's tenure. Several high-level meetings and state visits signalled a shared understanding that stable relations between the two countries were essential for regional stability. Informal summits, notably those held in Wuhan in 2018 and Mamallapuram in 2019, were significant attempts to restore trust following periods of friction. These meetings emphasized the importance of strategic communication, sensitivity to each other's concerns, and the necessity of preventing disagreements from escalating into broader confrontation (Jaishankar, 2020; Tellis, 2020).

Even when tensions intensified, diplomatic channels continued to operate, indicating that dialogue remained an important mechanism for managing crises and maintaining a minimum level of stability in the relationship. Economic interaction has also remained a key, though complex, component of bilateral engagement. During Modi's tenure, China continued to rank among India's largest trading partners, reflecting a significant level of economic interdependence between the two economies (Pant & Joshi, 2017). Bilateral trade expanded across several sectors, including electronics, pharmaceutical inputs, and industrial equipment. At the same time, concerns regarding trade imbalances and limited access for Indian goods in Chinese markets became increasingly prominent. Border tensions and security concerns prompted India to reconsider certain economic vulnerabilities, particularly after the confrontations in eastern Ladakh. Nevertheless, economic relations were not completely severed; instead, cooperation continued in a more cautious and selective form, demonstrating the resilience of economic ties despite political tensions (Mohan, 2020). Engagement within multilateral institutions represents another important dimension of cooperation between the two countries.

India and China have participated actively in platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where they have often worked together on matters related to global governance, economic development, and regional security. Within the BRICS framework, both states have supported initiatives aimed at reforming global financial institutions and increasing the representation of emerging economies in international decision-making structures. Similarly, the SCO has provided opportunities for dialogue on issues such as regional stability and counter-terrorism. On global challenges, including climate change negotiations, India and China have frequently adopted similar positions by emphasizing the principles of equity and differentiated responsibilities for developing countries (Hurrell & Sengupta, 2019).

Taken together, these patterns of diplomatic, economic, and multilateral engagement demonstrate that cooperation has continued alongside rivalry in Sino-Indian relations during Modi's tenure. Rather than

representing a purely adversarial relationship, interactions between the two countries have reflected a pragmatic approach in which limited cooperation persists despite deeper strategic disagreements. This selective engagement highlights the recognition on both sides that certain shared interests remain, even as structural tensions continue to influence the overall trajectory of the bilateral relationship (Zhang & Austin, 2006).

7. Areas of Conflict and Strategic Competition

Although elements of cooperation have persisted in Sino-Indian relations during the tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the bilateral relationship has increasingly been characterized by tensions and strategic rivalry. These frictions stem largely from long-standing structural disagreements, which have been further intensified by shifting regional and global power dynamics (Garver, 2016; Pant, 2020). As the strategic environment in Asia has evolved, the interaction between India and China has reflected a growing competition for influence alongside limited areas of engagement. One of the most visible manifestations of this tension has been the recurrence of border disputes and military confrontations. The boundary along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) remains unsettled, and contrasting territorial claims have repeatedly led to face-offs between the armed forces of both countries. Episodes such as the Doklam crisis and the later confrontations in eastern Ladakh highlighted the vulnerability of existing border management arrangements (Tellis, 2020; Smith, 2021). Both India and China have expanded infrastructure and increased troop deployments in frontier areas, actions that are often justified as defensive but tend to heighten suspicion on the other side. These developments have intensified security concerns and demonstrated that the boundary question continues to represent one of the most critical unresolved issues in bilateral relations.

The persistence of border tensions has also contributed to a broader climate of strategic mistrust and has weakened previously established confidence-building arrangements. Over several decades, both countries negotiated agreements intended to preserve stability along the border and prevent unintended escalation. However, repeated confrontations during Modi's period in office have exposed the limitations of these frameworks (Fravel, 2020). Divergent interpretations of agreements, combined with limited transparency regarding military activities, have reduced the effectiveness of existing mechanisms. Consequently, the mutual trust that once supported diplomatic engagement has gradually eroded, making crisis management more difficult. Competition between the two countries also extends beyond the border to the broader South Asian region and the Indo-Pacific. China's growing economic and strategic presence in South Asia, particularly through large-scale infrastructure initiatives and partnerships with neighbouring states, has been perceived in New Delhi as challenging India's traditional regional influence (Mohan, 2020; Pant & Joshi, 2017).

Concerns about connectivity initiatives and potential strategic access points in India's neighbourhood have contributed to fears of strategic encirclement. In response, India has increasingly prioritized deeper engagement with regional partners and sought to reinforce its strategic position. At a wider regional level, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as another arena in which the strategic interests of India and China increasingly diverge. India has expanded cooperation with countries that support a free and rules-based regional order, while China has simultaneously broadened its maritime and strategic presence across the region (Scott, 2018). These contrasting approaches have reinforced competitive dynamics and added complexity to bilateral relations. Taken together, the persistence of border disputes, growing strategic mistrust, and regional competition illustrate how structural and geopolitical factors have increasingly

shaped Sino-Indian relations during Modi's tenure, constraining the prospects for sustained cooperation despite continuing diplomatic engagement.

8. Shifting Patterns and Policy Implications

Sino-Indian relations during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's regime reveal a noticeable shift in policy orientation, moving from initial engagement toward a posture of strategic caution. This transition reflects the interplay between diplomatic aspirations and persistent structural challenges, particularly in the realm of security and regional competition (Pant & Joshi, 2017; Garver, 2016). The evolving nature of this relationship has significant implications for India's foreign policy and the broader Asian strategic landscape. The transition from engagement to strategic caution became evident as early optimism surrounding high-level diplomatic outreach encountered repeated security setbacks. In the initial phase of Modi's tenure, emphasis was placed on dialogue, economic engagement, and leadership-level interactions aimed at stabilizing relations (Jaishankar, 2020).

However, recurring border tensions and the limitations of confidence-building measures gradually eroded this approach (Tellis, 2020). The inability of diplomatic engagement alone to prevent military confrontations led to a reassessment of assumptions regarding China's intentions. As a result, engagement increasingly became selective and conditional, supplemented by heightened vigilance and preparedness. This shift is closely tied to India's evolving China strategy under Modi, which has become more assertive and interest-driven over time. India has placed greater emphasis on safeguarding territorial integrity, enhancing military infrastructure along the border, and reducing strategic vulnerabilities (Fravel, 2020; Pant, 2020). Simultaneously, New Delhi has sought to diversify its foreign policy options by strengthening partnerships with regional and global actors. While maintaining functional diplomatic channels with China, India has demonstrated a willingness to respond firmly to perceived challenges, signalling a departure from earlier restraint-focused approaches (Mohan, 2020). This recalibration reflects a broader recognition of China as both a partner in limited areas and a strategic competitor.

The impact on regional security and the Asian power balance has been significant. Heightened tensions between Asia's two major powers have increased uncertainty in the region, particularly along contested border areas (Watts, 2023). At the same time, India's strategic repositioning has contributed to evolving alignments within the Indo-Pacific (Tellis, 2020; Pant & Saha, 2021). Efforts to enhance maritime cooperation, promote a rules-based regional order, and deepen engagement with like-minded states have altered regional dynamics. These developments have implications not only for India-China relations but also for smaller states navigating the competitive environment shaped by larger powers. Overall, the shifting patterns observed during Modi's regime indicate a move toward strategic realism, where cooperation is pursued pragmatically but no longer assumed to be sufficient for managing rivalry (Mearsheimer, 2014; Waltz, 1979). The policy implications of this shift extend beyond bilateral relations, influencing regional stability and the balance of power in Asia. Understanding this transition is essential for assessing the future trajectory of Sino-Indian relations in an increasingly contested regional order.

9. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Sino-Indian relations during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure reflect a sustained interplay between cooperation and strategic rivalry. Although diplomatic engagement and economic exchanges have continued, they have not mitigated core security concerns rooted in unresolved boundary disputes and broader geopolitical competition (Malik, 2004; Fravel, 2020).

This suggests that engagement mechanisms alone are insufficient to stabilize relations in the absence of deeper mutual trust. The analysis further indicates that cooperation has become selective and issue-specific. While trade and multilateral interaction persist, these engagements function largely as instruments for crisis management rather than pathways toward strategic alignment (Keohane & Nye, 1977). Simultaneously, recurring border tensions reinforce security dilemmas, wherein defensive actions by one side are interpreted as threatening by the other (Jervis, 1978). In terms of foreign policy orientation, India exhibits continuity in its commitment to strategic autonomy, alongside a discernible shift toward greater strategic caution and regional balancing (Tellis, 2020). Modi's leadership reflects a more explicit acknowledgment of China as a long-term competitor. Overall, the findings underscore an evolving relationship shaped by simultaneous engagement and rivalry, with significant implications for regional stability.

10. Conclusion

This study has analyzed Sino-Indian relations during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tenure by examining the evolving interaction between cooperation and conflict. It argues that although diplomatic dialogue and economic exchanges have continued, structural constraints—particularly the unresolved boundary dispute and strategic competition—have increasingly shaped bilateral dynamics (Fravel, 2020). Since 2014, relations have shifted toward a more security-oriented and interest-driven framework, with border tensions and mistrust influencing policy decisions. India's approach reflects continuity in strategic autonomy alongside a more assertive response to emerging threats (Scott, 2018). While limited cooperation in multilateral settings persists, sustained rivalry is likely to remain central. Future research should incorporate comparative and quantitative approaches and examine domestic political and leadership-level factors affecting bilateral engagement.

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