

Strategic Competition with Constrained Cooperation: India–China Relations from a Defence and Security Perspective

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Abstract

India and China are major powers engaged in both deep economic exchange and intense strategic rivalry. From a defence and security perspective, their relationship combines fierce competition with limited cooperation. This paper examines historical legacies (especially the 1962 border war) and current developments: ongoing Himalayan standoffs, maritime competition in the Indo-Pacific, power asymmetries, regional ambitions, and defence modernization. It highlights how each side's strategic posture – strengthening deterrence and forging partnerships – is moderated by mutual economic ties and global responsibilities. The analysis shows that the India–China dynamic today is characterized by strategic competition (at the border and in regional influence) alongside cautious cooperation (trade, multilateral dialogue), which together sustain an uneasy stability without resolving the core rivalry.

Keywords: India–China Relations, Military Modernization, Power Asymmetry, Strategic Competition, Border Disputes, Multilateral Diplomacy, Indo-Pacific Security

Bottom-line-up-front: The India–China relationship today is dominated by strategic competition – particularly along the Himalayan frontier and in the Indo-Pacific – yet limited cooperation persists due to deep economic ties and shared global responsibilities. India has responded to Chinese assertiveness with increased deterrence (troop deployments, road building, defence partnerships) and soft-balancing measures, while engaging China in international forums. This balancing act defines the current security dynamic between the two powers.

Problem of statement: The central problem is how India can safeguard its security and sovereignty against an increasingly assertive China without triggering a major conflict. This challenge is complicated by deep economic links and common global commitments, which simultaneously constrain and entangle the rivalry.

So what?: This analysis is crucial for policymakers balancing deterrence and diplomacy. It suggests that India should strengthen its defence and international partnerships (e.g. Quad, trilateral exercises) to counterbalance China, while maintaining limited cooperation (in trade, climate, multilateral institutions) to reduce the risk of miscalculation. Recognizing the “constrained cooperation” dynamic helps New Delhi calibrate its China policy to preserve stability in the Indo-Pacific and avoid unintended escalation.

Introduction

India and China are two ancient civilizations that have become the world's most populous nations and major powers, yet their bilateral relations remain fraught with mutual suspicion. Since the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the two countries have engaged in a persistent security competition across their disputed Himalayan border. Despite periods of diplomacy and trade, the legacy of 1962 and recurrent skirmishes (for example, the 1967 Nathu La clashes and the 1987 Sumdorong Chu standoff) have kept the two militaries on high alert. Border confidence-building measures – notably the 1993 “Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control” and the 1996 “Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control” – established ground rules and communication mechanisms, but they did not resolve the boundary question.¹ In practice, each side continued to reinforce frontier deployments and infrastructure, preparing for the worst even as it publicly expressed a desire for peace. Scholarly analyses in leading journals have consistently noted that these agreements functioned as crisis-management tools rather than conflict-resolution mechanisms.²

In recent years the strategic rivalry has sharpened. In mid-2020, Indian and Chinese troops engaged in fierce combat in Ladakh's Galwan Valley, resulting in casualties and signaling a rupture of earlier tacit understandings.³ The clash marked the first combat fatalities along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in decades and fundamentally altered perceptions in New Delhi regarding Beijing's intentions.⁴ India responded by bolstering its defenses: tens of thousands of troops were kept year-round on the frontier, reversing earlier patterns of seasonal thinning.⁵ Diplomatic rhetoric hardened, with Indian officials holding China responsible for the violent breach of prior confidence-building norms. China likewise consolidated positions in contested areas and increased patrol activity, while accelerating infrastructure construction in Tibet and Xinjiang.⁶ These developments indicated that the old border status quo could no longer be taken for granted.

At the same time, both sides acknowledged that large-scale war would be ruinous given nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, and global reputational costs.⁷ They continued military and diplomatic talks through Corps Commander-level meetings and multilateral forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, even as trust plummeted. Analysts writing in Scopus-indexed and peer-reviewed outlets argue that this duality—crisis alongside continued engagement—reflects a broader pattern of competitive coexistence.⁸ In sum, India and China today coexist in an uneasy balance: they are rivals locked in strategic competition, yet constrained by mutual interests and the prohibitive costs of open conflict.

This paper analyses India–China relations from a defence and security perspective, arguing that it is best understood as “strategic competition with constrained cooperation.” It systematically examines historical legacies—especially post-1962 conflicts—and current geopolitical developments. Key themes include: the enduring Himalayan border dispute and recent standoffs; maritime strategy in the wider Indo-Pacific (including China's Indian Ocean strategy and India's SAGAR vision); military power asymmetry and modernization trajectories; economic interdependence amid strategic rivalry; and international strategic alignments such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Each dimension is illustrated with recent events and the latest scholarly and policy research (2015–2024), demonstrating how India and China calibrate their policies to maximize strategic advantage without precipitating catastrophe.

Historical Context and the 1962 War

The contemporary security relationship between India and China is profoundly shaped by the legacy of

the 1962 border war.⁹ The conflict not only redrew the strategic landscape of Asia but also left the Himalayan boundary unsettled, with the Line of Actual Control (LAC) remaining ambiguously defined across multiple sectors.¹⁰ Although brief, the war institutionalized distrust and entrenched a militarized frontier that continues to define bilateral interactions. Scholars argue that 1962 transformed the dispute from a diplomatic disagreement into a long-term strategic rivalry embedded in national security doctrines.¹¹

In the decades that followed, both countries prioritized other pressing concerns—India concentrated on its rivalry with Pakistan and domestic consolidation, while China navigated internal upheavals and shifting global alignments.¹² Nevertheless, tensions along the frontier persisted. Armed exchanges at Nathu La and Cho La in 1967, followed by the 1987 Sumdorong Chu crisis, underscored the volatility of the border.¹³ Although these incidents did not escalate into full-scale war, they reinforced a classic security dilemma: defensive deployments by one side were perceived as offensive preparations by the other.¹⁴

To mitigate escalation risks, New Delhi and Beijing gradually introduced confidence-building mechanisms (CBMs). The 1993 Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the LAC and the 1996 Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field institutionalized communication channels, limited certain categories of military activity, and established procedures to prevent accidental clashes.¹⁵ These measures contributed to relative stability for nearly two decades. However, they did not resolve the underlying territorial dispute. As analysts observe, while the accords reduced the likelihood of inadvertent escalation, they left the political boundary “abnormal”—unsettled yet heavily militarized.¹⁶ By the early 2000s, India had effectively compartmentalized the border issue, expanding trade and diplomatic engagement even as it maintained substantial force deployments in the high Himalayas.¹⁷ Bilateral trade increased significantly, and both states cooperated in multilateral forums such as the BRICS.¹⁸

Entering the twenty-first century, mutual trust remained fragile. Episodes such as the 2013 Depsang standoff and subsequent confrontations revealed the limits of earlier CBMs.¹⁹ Diplomatic statements acknowledging each other’s concerns did little to eliminate deep-rooted anxieties shaped by historical memory—particularly competing interpretations of the 1962 conflict.²⁰ Meanwhile, infrastructure development along the border accelerated. India invested in roads, bridges, and advanced landing grounds in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh, while China expanded transportation and dual-use facilities across the Tibetan Plateau.²¹ These parallel modernization efforts intensified the security dilemma, as measures intended for deterrence appeared threatening to the other side.²²

Indo-Pacific Strategy and Maritime Competition

For much of the post-independence period, India’s strategic focus remained concentrated on its continental frontiers with Pakistan and China.²³ However, the rapid expansion of China’s naval capabilities and its growing presence in the Indian Ocean have prompted a marked recalibration in New Delhi’s priorities.²⁴ The Indian Ocean Region (IOR)—stretching from the Strait of Malacca to the Mozambique Channel—has emerged as a central arena of strategic concern.²⁵ Nearly 80 percent of India’s trade by volume and the bulk of its energy imports transit these sea lines of communication (SLOCs), rendering maritime security indispensable to national security.²⁶

In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi articulated the SAGAR doctrine (“Security and Growth for All in the Region”), projecting India as a net security provider and champion of an open, inclusive maritime order.²⁷ This vision aligns with the broader Indo-Pacific strategic construct, which situates India as a

pivotal actor in balancing power in maritime Asia.²⁸ India's maritime strategy emphasizes cooperative security and capacity-building among littoral states. Through initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), the MILAN multilateral exercises, and coordinated patrols with Southeast Asian partners, New Delhi has sought to institutionalize regional naval collaboration.²⁹ India has also expanded maritime domain awareness through coastal radar networks and strategic access arrangements with partners, enhancing its ability to monitor Chinese naval movements.³⁰

Despite this cooperative framing, competition dominates the maritime landscape. China has significantly increased deployments of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the Indian Ocean, including submarine patrols and aircraft carrier transits.³¹ Meanwhile, India has expanded its own naval capabilities, commissioning advanced destroyers, frigates, submarines, and its first indigenously built aircraft carrier, INS Vikrant, in 2022.³² Analysts suggest that the evolving maritime balance raises fundamental questions about whether India and China will ultimately cooperate, coexist, compete, or confront one another in this shared strategic space.³³ Current trajectories indicate sustained competition rather than convergence.

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad)—comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia—has become a focal point of maritime balancing.³⁴ Through joint naval exercises such as Malabar and coordination on maritime domain awareness, critical technologies, and supply chain resilience, the Quad provides a platform for strategic alignment without formal alliance commitments.³⁵ Scholars note that the grouping emerged from shared concerns about China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, yet its informal structure allows India to preserve strategic autonomy and avoid overt bloc politics.³⁶ In this sense, India employs the Quad as a soft-balancing mechanism—strengthening deterrence while maintaining diplomatic engagement with Beijing.

China, for its part, perceives India's expanding partnerships as part of a broader containment strategy. Beijing has criticized the Quad as an exclusionary coalition and views India's growing naval activism with suspicion.³⁷ Concurrently, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) includes a maritime dimension, with infrastructure projects such as Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar enhancing Beijing's strategic footprint in the Indian Ocean.³⁸ These developments are often characterized in Indian strategic discourse as a "String of Pearls," implying potential dual-use facilities that could support PLAN operations.³⁹ In response, India has advanced alternative connectivity initiatives, including the development of Iran's Chabahar port and engagement with Indo-Pacific economic frameworks that exclude China.⁴⁰

Economic Interdependence and Strategic Rivalry

India-China relations are marked by a striking paradox: deep economic interdependence coexists with acute strategic distrust. Bilateral trade has grown dramatically, with China becoming India's largest trading partner and total trade surpassing US\$120 billion by 2022.⁴¹ India runs a substantial and persistent trade deficit, importing manufactured goods, electronics, and industrial inputs while exporting primarily raw materials and intermediate goods.⁴²

This interdependence operates as both constraint and vulnerability. On one hand, dense trade linkages raise the economic costs of military confrontation, creating incentives for restraint.⁴³ On the other hand, asymmetric trade patterns generate strategic anxieties. Indian policymakers express concern over dependence on Chinese imports—particularly in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, telecommunications equipment, and renewable energy components—while China remains cautious about regulatory unpredictability and political risk in the Indian market.⁴⁴

Following the 2017 Doklam crisis and especially after the 2020 Ladakh standoff, India increasingly deployed economic instruments as tools of statecraft.⁴⁵ New Delhi imposed higher tariffs on selected Chinese goods, tightened foreign direct investment (FDI) screening rules for neighboring countries, and banned more than 200 Chinese mobile applications on data security grounds.⁴⁶ Chinese telecommunications firms have faced regulatory scrutiny, and certain infrastructure proposals have been restricted due to national security concerns.⁴⁷ Analysts characterize this approach as a form of “hard balancing,” integrating military deterrence with economic countermeasures to limit China’s strategic leverage.⁴⁸

China’s Belt and Road Initiative further complicates bilateral dynamics. India has declined to join the BRI, primarily objecting to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which traverses territory claimed by India.⁴⁹ Chinese investments in ports such as Gwadar (Pakistan) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka) reinforce Indian perceptions of strategic encirclement.⁵⁰ In response, India has strengthened alternative regional connectivity projects and deepened partnerships with like-minded states to offset China’s influence.⁵¹

Military Modernization and Power Asymmetry

China’s military modernization has, over the past two decades, significantly outpaced India’s in both scale and technological sophistication. The widening gap is rooted in sustained differences in economic capacity, defence-industrial reform, and doctrinal innovation within the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Comparative research in leading strategic studies journals demonstrates that Beijing’s defence expenditure consistently exceeds India’s by a factor of roughly three to one, allowing China to pursue simultaneous modernization across conventional, strategic, cyber, and space domains.⁵² According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China accounted for approximately 13 percent of global military expenditure in 2022, while India accounted for roughly 3.6 percent.⁵³ This fiscal asymmetry directly translates into divergent modernization outcomes.

In the aerospace domain, China’s induction of the J-20 stealth fighter marks a significant qualitative leap, reflecting investments in indigenous research, avionics, and integrated command systems. Scholarly analyses argue that China’s objective is not merely force replacement but the achievement of theater-wide dominance through networked warfare and long-range precision strike.⁵⁴ By contrast, India’s modernization has progressed incrementally. Although India has inducted Rafale fighters and continues to expand fleets of Su-30MKIs and Tejas aircraft, peer-reviewed assessments emphasize persistent procurement delays and capability shortfalls relative to China’s advancements in stealth and electronic warfare.⁵⁵ The Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA) program, while symbolically important, remains in development, underscoring the longer timeline required for India to narrow the technological gap.

Naval modernization further illustrates structural imbalance. China’s maritime strategy has evolved from coastal defence to blue-water capability, symbolized by the commissioning of aircraft carriers such as Liaoning and Shandong. Academic studies interpret these developments as part of a broader effort to secure sea lines of communication and project power across the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁶ India operates INS Vikramaditya and commissioned INS Vikrant in 2022, a milestone in indigenous shipbuilding. Yet maritime scholarship indicates that India’s naval doctrine remains primarily regionally oriented, emphasizing sea denial and control within the northern Indian Ocean rather than sustained global projection.⁵⁷ As David Brewster contends, the evolving maritime interaction between India and China—whether competitive or cooperative—will shape the future security architecture of the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁸

Presently, China's larger fleet of advanced surface combatants and nuclear submarines affords it broader operational flexibility.

Missile and strategic forces also underscore asymmetry. China's anti-ship ballistic missile capabilities, including systems such as the DF-21D, are widely analyzed as central to its anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) doctrine.⁵⁹ India's BrahMos cruise missile enhances precision-strike capability but does not replicate the strategic implications of China's long-range ballistic missile infrastructure. Additionally, China's strategic rocket forces maintain a substantially larger inventory of intercontinental and intermediate-range missiles. Although both states officially endorse no-first-use nuclear policies, comparative deterrence studies highlight how numerical and technological disparities influence perceptions of credibility and escalation dominance.⁶⁰

Institutional reform further reinforces China's advantage. The PLA's reorganization into theater commands and its emphasis on joint operations are frequently cited as evidence of systemic modernization aimed at integrated multi-domain warfare.⁶¹ India has initiated similar reforms, including the creation of a Chief of Defence Staff and moves toward theaterization, yet implementation has proceeded more gradually. Along the Himalayan frontier, both states have enhanced infrastructure and forward deployments, increasing the potential speed and intensity of localized crises.

Emerging domains such as cyber and space amplify the imbalance. China's demonstrated anti-satellite capability and expansion of space-based surveillance reflect its commitment to informationized warfare.⁶² India has developed parallel capabilities, including its own ASAT test, but scholarly comparisons suggest China retains a lead in operational integration and technological depth.⁶³ Consequently, any future confrontation would likely extend beyond conventional domains into cyber and space, heightening escalation risks.

India's modernization strategy seeks to mitigate these disparities through indigenization and diversified partnerships. The "Make in India" initiative has stimulated domestic defence production, while procurement from the United States, France, Israel, and Russia provides access to advanced technologies. Analysts describe this as a combination of internal and external balancing strategies.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, most contemporary assessments conclude that China maintains superiority across nearly all major indicators of military capability.⁶⁵

Constrained Cooperation and Multilateral Engagement

Despite intensifying strategic rivalry, India and China continue to maintain limited cooperative mechanisms through multilateral institutions and structured bilateral dialogue. Scholars of Asian security frequently characterize this pattern as "competitive coexistence," in which rivalry is managed—but not resolved—through institutional engagement.⁶⁶ Both countries are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS, where they collaborate on non-sensitive functional issues such as counterterrorism coordination, development finance, and reform of global governance structures. Within the SCO framework, joint military exercises and counter-extremism initiatives provide opportunities for limited security cooperation.⁶⁷ Within BRICS, India and China have endorsed collective statements on development banking, climate finance, and the restructuring of international financial institutions.⁶⁸

Beyond these groupings, both states participate in broader diplomatic platforms such as the G20 and the Asian Development Bank, where they deliberate on global economic stability and development priorities. However, academic analyses suggest that India has increasingly used such forums as instruments of "soft balancing," subtly constraining Chinese influence by mobilizing coalitions around issues aligned with

New Delhi's interests.⁶⁹ For example, in BRICS and United Nations settings, India has raised concerns regarding cross-border terrorism emanating from Pakistan, countering what it perceives as China's reluctance to directly criticize Islamabad.⁷⁰ One prominent study argues that India's engagement in RIC (Russia–India–China), BRICS, the SCO, and IBSA reflects “conscious constraints on cooperation,” wherein institutional participation coexists with strategic hedging.⁷¹

Bilateral dialogue mechanisms further illustrate this cautious engagement. Even amid heightened tensions along the Himalayan frontier, military commanders from both sides continue periodic meetings at corps and theater levels to manage incidents and reduce escalation risks. Diplomatic communication persists through foreign secretary–level talks and high-level summits. During the 2020–21 Ladakh crisis, India and China convened multiple rounds of military and diplomatic negotiations under the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC), underscoring mutual recognition of the need for crisis management channels.⁷² Scholars note that such sustained communication reflects a shared interest in preventing inadvertent escalation, even as political trust remains low.⁷³

Economic and societal interactions, though curtailed, have not entirely ceased. Trade volumes remain substantial despite regulatory tightening, and limited investment flows continue in selected sectors. In global governance contexts, India and China have cooperated episodically on financial reform initiatives and development projects. During the COVID-19 pandemic, both countries engaged in parallel humanitarian diplomacy—China supplying medical equipment globally, and India distributing vaccines across Asia and Africa—illustrating overlapping but competitive forms of global engagement.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, cooperation is constrained by deepening distrust. Indian strategic discourse increasingly emphasizes that normalization of bilateral ties is contingent upon “peace and tranquility” along the border and respect for sovereignty agreements.⁷⁵

In multilateral diplomacy, China's language toward India has become more measured, often referring to India as a partner while simultaneously criticizing aspects of its Indo-Pacific alignment and opposition to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). India, conversely, adopts relatively restrained rhetoric in global forums while deepening strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, Australia, and Southeast Asian states. This dual-track approach—public moderation combined with strategic hedging—is widely interpreted in academic literature as a pragmatic adaptation to structural rivalry.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Strategic competition dominates India–China relations, but it is tempered by pragmatic cooperation and mutual constraints. The parties' post-1962 history created a persistent Himalayan rivalry, which in recent years has crystallized in the Ladakh standoff. In parallel, both nations are jockeying for influence in the broader Indo-Pacific, with India rallying partners to balance China's maritime ambitions and China expanding its network of regional footholds. Military and nuclear arms races continue under the shadow of deterrence, while economic interdependence imposes limits on outright conflict.

In this context, India's policy has been to strengthen deterrence while avoiding war. It has expanded border infrastructure and troop deployments, signed closer defence agreements (e.g. with the US-Japan-Australia), and publicly condemned Chinese transgressions. Simultaneously, it retains channels for dialogue and crisis management, and acknowledges areas of shared interest (e.g. global trade stability, climate goals). For China, India is recognized as a major power to be engaged and sometimes contained, but not as an implacable enemy.

The net result is an uneasy balance of rivalry and guarded engagement. Neither side seems willing to give ground on core interests – India will not acquiesce to Chinese claims on territory, and China will not accept India's regional ascendancy without challenge – yet both recognize that conflict would be enormously costly. As such, the strategic competition is likely to remain high but bounded by economic interdependence and international norms. Policymakers should therefore manage this competition with calibrated responses: building defence capabilities and alliances on the one hand, while preserving opportunities for diplomacy and cooperation on the other. This nuanced approach will be essential for maintaining stability in the Indo-Pacific in the face of a rising China and an ambitious India.

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