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From Galwan to Kazan:The Changing Dynamics of India-China Relations

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Abstract

India's relations with China have witnessed a major transformation following the 2020 Galwan Valley skirmishes, which intensified strategic distrust and created a prolonged period of diplomatic and military tensions. Despite these differences, both countries have continued to engage within multilateral frameworks such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where their interests converge on common issues such as global governance, multipolarity, regional stability, and the Global South. Further questions have been raised about the nature and trajectory of the evolving relationship as recent efforts to stabilise bilateral relations were initiated. This article examines the contemporary India-China relations in an arena where competition and cooperation coexist. It puts particular emphasis on their engagement in BRICS and SCO but also situates these developments within wider areas of strategic divergences, including connectivity and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It argues that the post-Galwan relationship shall not be understood as a binary of confrontation and rapprochement, but it reflects a pattern of selective multilateral cooperation through which both countries seek to advance their strategic interests while managing the differences. This evolving dynamic is of broader significance for the emerging Asian and international order.

Keywords: India-China relations; competitive coexistence; multilateralism; strategic rivalry; international order

Introduction

India-China relations have been contradictory since the fatal confrontation between Indian and Chinese troops in the Galwan Valley in June 2020. This led to the deterioration of bilateral relations, heightened military tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), India's imposition of restrictions on certain Chinese applications, and increased scrutiny of Chinese investments in the Indian economy. The bilateral meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Kazan BRICS Summit in October 2024 indicated both states' cautious re-engagement with each other.

Both countries have continued to disagree over their unresolved boundary disputes. China's regional presence and its relationship with Pakistan remain a matter of concern for India. India has continued to oppose China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly because of

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sovereignty concerns associated with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Nevertheless, both countries remain participants in multilateral institutions, including BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). These institutions provide opportunities for dialogue and cooperation on converging interests. This draws us towards the central question. Why does multilateral cooperation between India and China continue to persist despite deep bilateral distrust?

This paper therefore rejects the interpretations that India and China are moving towards complete rapprochement and that their relationship is defined exclusively by confrontation. Rather, the post-Galwan period in bilateral relations is characterised by competitive coexistence. India and China have continued to compete strategically, yet cooperate on selective issues where their interests converge. The analysis of these developments enables us to examine the emergence of a balance between strategic competition and selective cooperation and evaluate its implications for the emerging Asian regional order.

Galwan and the Deterioration of Bilateral Relations

The boundary dispute between India and China has been longstanding, originating from unresolved territorial disagreement inherited from historical boundary agreements and competing interpretations of the frontiers. In spite of several negotiations and confidence-building measures, a consensus was not achieved on a mutually agreed international boundary. The Line of Actual Control (LAC) serves as the *de facto* demarcation separating the areas controlled by each country. The situation became increasingly tense in eastern Ladakh during the spring of 2020 amid heightened military tensions, increased military deployments, and confrontation across multiple points along the border. China's infrastructure development initiatives across the frontier, including the construction of roads, bridges, and other military-support projects, created a security dilemma for India. This was combined by unresolved territorial claims, competing perceptions, and limited mutual mistrust, creating conditions for a local military confrontation to escalate into a wider diplomatic crisis.

Ultimately, a violent confrontation broke out between Indian and Chinese troops amid the wider border standoff and disengagement negotiations on 15 June 2020 in the Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh. As per official reports, 20 Indian soldiers were martyred in the confrontation, while the Chinese forces also acknowledged the death of 4 of their military personnel. This confrontation proved to be the first fatal border confrontation between the two countries in several decades. This fuelled public outrage in India, leading to diplomatic protests, heightened military vigilance across the frontiers, and a growing suspicion of Chinese intentions. The confrontation posed questions over the effectiveness of existing border management, confidence-building measures, and mechanisms for military disengagement. It was not a mere local military incident but a major crisis of confidence, exposing the limitations of border-management arrangements and contributing to bilateral mistrust without complete termination of diplomatic communication.

The crisis expanded beyond the military sphere and affected economic security, digital technology and investment regulation, and created national security concerns. On 29 June 2020, the Government of India banned 59 Chinese mobile applications, including TikTok,

WeChat and UC Browser (DPIIT, 2020; PIB, 2020). The government gave an official justification that the move was necessary in order to safeguard India's sovereignty and integrity, defence and state security, law and public order, and data protection and privacy concerns. This was followed by additional rounds of bans on applications in September and November 2020. At the same time, the government also initiated measures to scrutinise foreign investment in India. Months ahead of the Galwan incident and amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the government made screening mandatory for investments from entities in countries sharing a land border with India. This move was introduced amidst growing concerns over opportunistic takeovers and not as a retaliatory measure for the military standoff. Following the crisis, commercial and technological governance became increasingly scrutinised through the lens of national security as the use of regulatory and economic instruments increased in order to address strategic vulnerabilities. The selective control measures, rather than a comprehensive ban on all Chinese goods or economic engagement, reflected the changing nature of India's policy on China.

Despite the deteriorated diplomatic relations, economic engagement was not disrupted, as substantial bilateral trade continued. Chinese goods and intermediate inputs remain important to several Indian industries, especially the electronics, electrical machinery, industrial equipment, manufacturing components, pharmaceutical, etc. sectors. Supply-chain vulnerability, cost advantages, and limited immediate alternatives for certain inputs posed challenges for Indian industries to reduce their dependence on China. This prompted a new policy dilemma for New Delhi as it sought to reduce the strategic vulnerabilities and excessive dependence on Chinese goods and services while protecting India's industrial competitiveness and economic interdependence. In this context, de-risking, reducing vulnerabilities in sensitive sectors rather than severing economic ties, better captures India's approach. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic created constraints as international travel was disrupted and passenger flights between both countries were suspended, further affecting the deteriorating bilateral relations by halting connectivity and people-to-people exchanges. In spite of the continued diplomatic and military tensions amidst the persistent mistrust, there was no complete termination of communication, as back channels continued to operate during this period. The relationship thus illustrates how political rivalry can coexist with practical economic dependence, complicating efforts to transform political tensions into comprehensive economic disengagement.

China's Regional Influence and Continuing Diplomatic Engagement

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers a key framework for understanding Beijing's expanding economic and strategic influence in the region, using infrastructure development, connectivity, and investment partnerships to strengthen its regional presence. One of its major components is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), launched in 2015, which connects China's Xinjiang region with Pakistan through a network of transport and connectivity projects, including links to the Gwadar port. China maintains a strategic partnership with Pakistan, including economic cooperation alongside defence and security ties. However, the CPEC remains a matter of contention between India and China as it passes through parts of the disputed Kashmir region that India claims as its own territory but is

administered by Pakistan. India's consistent refusal to endorse the corridor in its present form centres on questions of sovereignty and territorial integrity, alongside broader concerns about the strategic implications stemming from China's growing cooperation with Pakistan, perceiving pressure on India's regional position. The BRI therefore illustrates that China's regional influence on India extends beyond the disputed boundary between the two countries.

Yet another instance of China's growing economic presence in South Asia is its involvement in Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, an infrastructure development project financed by China. The port became the subject of a 99-year lease to a Chinese company in 2017, following negotiations amid Sri Lanka's financial difficulties (Carrai, 2019). China's infrastructural investment in the Indian Ocean through commercial connectivity, maritime trade, and regional economic presence posed concerns for India, given its proximity to major Indian Ocean shipping routes, as it raised potential strategic implications of China's expanding maritime footprint in the region. However, Hambantota should not automatically be treated as evidence of a deliberate Chinese strategy to encircle India or as proof of established military use. Rather, the case illustrates how China's overseas infrastructure investments can generate strategic concerns for India.

India and China have continued to engage through multilateral diplomacy, articulating that bilateral diplomatic engagement cannot be put to a complete halt despite strategic differences. An important example was the G20 Summit hosted by India in September 2023, which Chinese State Premier Li Qiang attended in place of President Xi Jinping. Although Xi's absence attracted attention, Li's presence ensured China's representation at a major diplomatic event hosted by India at a time when diplomatic relations were at their lowest juncture. However, this development does not indicate any significant shift in China's policy on India. It, rather, highlights the continued emphasis that both countries place on multilateral institutions, as they provide avenues for interaction despite disagreements. Both India and China have contributions to the agendas of global economic governance, development, international cooperation, and greater representation of the Global South. These shared interests do not eliminate their strategic rivalry but, at the same time, create opportunities for diplomatic engagement. The contrast between persistent bilateral mistrust and continued participation in international forums provides an important context for understanding the cautious efforts towards stabilisation of relations that followed in 2024, culminating in the meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the BRICS Summit in Kazan.

From Confrontation to Cautious Re-engagement

The military standoff in eastern Ladakh in the aftermath of the Galwan Valley clash of June 2020, leading to continued military deployment, became a major obstacle in normalising India-China relations. A breakthrough was achieved on 21 October 2024, following rounds of commander-level dialogues, after both countries reached an understanding on patrolling arrangements along the LAC in the Depsang and Demchok areas of eastern Ladakh. The agreement facilitated disengagement at both locations and helped to ease a significant part of the prolonged border confrontation. Although the agreement failed to entirely resolve the boundary dispute or automatically eliminate all military tensions along the LAC, it created conditions for renewed high-level diplomatic engagement after years of mistrust. Yet another

significant development was the bilateral meeting between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi on 23 October 2024 on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia (PIB, 2024). Their first formal bilateral meeting in five years indicated a mutual willingness to restore high-level communication and manage differences.

Following the understandings achieved at Kazan, efforts were initiated to restore practical exchanges between both countries. In January 2025, Indian and Chinese officials agreed to coordinate towards restoring direct flights, facilitating journalist exchanges, and resuming the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, alongside marking commemorative activities for the 75 years of diplomatic relations. Further engagement took place during the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to India in August 2025. The visit involved discussions on bilateral relations, border management, and economic cooperation. The Special Representatives met in New Delhi on 19 August 2025 to discuss the boundary question. Simultaneously, the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra was resumed in 2025 following years of suspension. These measures reflected a gradual move from diplomatic declarations towards practical engagement.

In August 2025, Prime Minister Modi visited China for the SCO Summit in Tianjin, his first visit to China in seven years. On the sidelines of the summit, he met with President Xi on 31 August 2025, where both leaders stressed the importance of maintaining border peace and expanding their bilateral engagement. Their discussions included trade imbalances, economic cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges. Meanwhile, direct commercial flights between mainland China and India were resumed on 26 October 2025, beginning with IndiGo's Kolkata-Guangzhou service (IndiGo, 2025). Additional routes were added, helping restore air connectivity after more than five years of suspension. These developments indicated tangible evidence of improving practical engagement, without resolving strategic differences.

In a reciprocal move, President Xi visited New Delhi on 12-13 September 2026 for the 18th BRICS Summit and held bilateral talks with Prime Minister Modi on 12 September. The discussions reflected the continuing importance of border peace, economic cooperation, and the management of outstanding differences. This visit demonstrated the continued importance of multilateral forums in providing opportunities for direct political engagement even when bilateral concerns remained unresolved. However, the boundary dispute, China's close partnership with Pakistan, competition for regional influence, and economic asymmetries continued to affect India's strategic calculations. The trajectory of the developments from Kazan in 2024 to New Delhi in 2026, therefore, illustrates managed engagement rather than complete reconciliation. This further raises a question about how India and China continue to cooperate within BRICS and SCO despite their continued strategic rivalry.

BRICS, SCO and India's Strategic Calculations

BRICS provides a platform for emerging and developing economies to pursue common interests despite divergences. Both countries have supported a more representative international order and have participated in discussions on global governance, international financial reform, development financing, and economic cooperation. Institutions such as the New Development Bank provide an institutional mechanism for financing infrastructure and sustainable development. However, China's economic weight and India's diplomatic

engagement provide both countries with reasons to remain proactive within BRICS. Yet, this active participation should not be interpreted as evidence of complete strategic alignment. India and China still differ on regional security, economic interests, and the future distribution of power in Asia.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation offers another perspective on how both countries maintain engagement despite strategic differences. Since becoming a full member in 2017, India has actively participated in discussions on regional security, counterterrorism, economic cooperation, and political dialogue across Eurasia. The organisation provides opportunities for India and China to coordinate their interests in preventing regional instability, yet they differ in their strategic approach and regional priorities. However, China's close relationship with Pakistan complicates India's security calculations, particularly in the context of SCO's regional membership. For India, participation in SCO also serves as a means of contributing to regional dialogue and preserving its diplomatic presence across Eurasia.

India's continued engagement with China through BRICS and SCO also reflects its pursuit of strategic autonomy. Its participation in the QUAD also illustrates its interest in a free, open, and stable Indo-Pacific, including maritime cooperation. India continues to pursue defence cooperation, technology partnerships, and supply-chain diversification with a range of countries. Yet, India has not abandoned multilateral institutions in which China plays a prominent role. Instead, it seeks to preserve flexibility across different diplomatic and strategic environments. This approach should not be described as equidistance between competing powers. Rather, it illustrates India's attempt to retain independent decision-making and strategic autonomy and cooperate where interests overlap and protect its security interests where they diverge.

The limitations of multilateral cooperation become evident in the unresolved boundary dispute, India's opposition to the CPEC, and concerns over the BRI. Neither organisation has eliminated these disagreements, and participation in common institutions does not require both countries to adopt identical strategic positions. Their cooperation on selective and issue-specific matters is shaped by overlapping interests and competing priorities. These multilateral forums contribute to preserving communication and creating avenues for cooperation without resolving the fundamental sources of mistrust. The India-China relationship consequently illustrates that multilateral engagement can coexist with strategic rivalry and supports the argument that their contemporary relationship is characterised by competitive coexistence rather than complete confrontation or full rapprochement (Hall, 2025).

Conclusion

India-China relations have continuously evolved since the Galwan Valley clash in 2020, shifting from active military confrontation towards cautious diplomatic engagement. The broader understanding in October 2024, following the meeting between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi at Kazan, followed by the restoration of civilian flights in 2025, and Xi's visit to India in 2026, illustrates this gradual shift. However, improved diplomatic communication has not resolved the boundary dispute, economic asymmetries, competition for regional influence, or India's concerns about China's close relationship with Pakistan. Yet, multilateral

forums such as BRICS and SCO have provided platforms for cooperation on selective issues when bilateral relations remained deadlocked. This relationship can be better understood as competitive coexistence than as either unremitting confrontation or complete rapprochement. The trajectory of the relations will continue to influence regional stability in Asia, the future of multilateral institutions, and the evolving balance of power in the international system. The lasting impact of the re-engagement will depend on whether diplomatic progress is sustained through border stability, mutual trust, and practical cooperation.

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