

A photograph of a mountain peak with prayer flags against a blue sky. The prayer flags are colorful and hang from the top of the mountain, extending across the sky. The mountain is rocky and brown, with some snow or light-colored rock near the top. The sky is a clear, bright blue with a few wispy clouds. The overall scene is serene and majestic.

bicc report

Herbert Wulf

Indo–Chinese Relations: On a Collision Course

By 2050, two centuries after the Opium Wars, which plunged the 'Middle Kingdom' into a period of hurt and shame, China is set to regain its might and re-ascend to the top of the world.¹

President Xi Jinping, in 2017, at the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress

We are a big country, we are an old country, we are a big power. We should make the world realise it. Once we do it, the world will not shy away from giving us the due respect and status.²

Narendra Modi, 2014, after his inauguration as Prime Minister

1 *The Times of India*, 1 June 2014. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/inviting-saarc-leaders-sent-out-a-message-to-world-modi/articleshow/35909002.cms>.

2 *Xinhua* http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/24/c_136702090.htm.

Contents

Summary	5
Introduction	6
Conflict, Competition, Cooperation & Collision	9
Taxing Conflicts	10
• Conflict-ridden Colonial Legacy	10
• The Ups and Downs: Territorial Conflicts in the Himalayas	14
• China's Friendship with India's "arch-enemy" Pakistan	20
Military Competition	26
• Balance of Military Power	26
• "String of Pearls" in the Indian Ocean	28
Difficult Economic Cooperation: India's Dependence	36
At the High Table of Global Affairs	38
• Growing Competition and Partial Co-operation	38
• The New Silk Road: China's Geopolitical Nationalistic Agenda or Global Cooperation Strategy?	43
• Having a Say with the 'Big Boys': India's Global Aspirations	49
Conclusion	54
Acronyms and Abbreviations	59
Bibliography	60
Annex	64

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While neither government wants to start a war, Indo–Chinese relations are marked by conflict, competition, lack of co-operation and, increasingly, a collision course. They increasingly see each other as rivals.

A dangerous competition is taking place between China and India. Four primary contentious issues and protracted conflicts dominate today's competitive and uncooperative relations between India and China: unresolved territorial conflicts in the Himalayas, China's close relations with Pakistan and its military assistance, China's activities in the Indian Ocean, especially the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the New Silk Road, and both countries' far-reaching and competitive global ambitions.

Summary

The two countries are engaged in fierce competition, and the present trend indicates that they are on a collision course. Could this course lead to war? The relationship was not always so problematic, but the times of brotherly relations are long gone. China cooperates with India in some forums but has consistently opposed India's aspiration to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

China's current drive for expansion, coupled with its forceful and assertive foreign policy approach makes it a difficult partner. The growing military power of China represents a challenge to India, although India also invests heavily in its armed forces, including nuclear weapons. India is an attractive strategic partner in the global confrontation between the West and China. However, India's democracy is under threat, and its government does not simply want to join the Western camp. It pursues a policy of multiple alliances, which is consistent with India's traditional policy of non-alignment. Both countries pursue a geopolitical strategy in Asia, and their global aspirations and visions are at odds with each other. This puts them on a potential collision course.

To manage this crisis, both governments should seek to de-escalate by promoting regular communications and refrain from further increasing their armed forces and reinforcing their military infrastructure, particularly in the contested territories. ●

When the Indian government welcomed visitors to the G20 summit in New Delhi in September 2023, one of the most significant figures, namely Chinese President Xi Jinping, was notably absent. He allowed himself to be represented, and Indian commentators saw this as an affront, which was also directed personally at Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. According to the prevailing interpretation in India, China's government envied the fact that India was the centre of global interest for a moment.

Introduction

Asia's superpowers, China and India, are vying for an intensified global role. This, along with other controversial relationships, is putting them increasingly on a collision course. Is there even a threat of war? After fighting in the Himalayan border region in 2020, the world's two largest nuclear-armed forces stood face to face for months. Communication between the two leaders was at a freezing point. Since the end of the colonial era, three disputed border areas in the Himalayas have been at the heart of the military conflicts. While neither government wants to start a war, Indo–Chinese relations are marked by conflict, competition, lack of co-operation and, increasingly, a collision course. They increasingly see each other as rivals.

Despite decades of efforts to find a diplomatic, internationally binding solution to the border disputes, including several meetings between Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi as well as former heads of government, no solution has so far been found. Both sides insist on their irreconcilable positions regarding the course of the common border. There is not even agreement on the length of the border. India speaks of a border of about 3,500 km, China of 2,000 km (International Crisis Group, 2023, p. 1). Recently, the positions have become even more entrenched.

Today, both governments are pursuing nationalist policies that are domestically oriented towards the recognition of their global role and “intimately connected to sovereign assertiveness and power projection abroad” (International Crisis Group, 2023, p. 1). Both countries are investing heavily in military capabilities—quantitatively in the number of soldiers and weapons and qualitatively through the constant modernisation of their armed forces. They are demonstrating their military presence, which increases the risk of a large-scale collision that might not be limited to the disputed areas in the Himalayas but could affect the entire region and beyond.

However, the complicated relationship between the two neighbours does not only consist of unresolved and dangerous border conflicts. In addition to the ups and downs of political and economic co-operation and partial co-operation in multilateral forums, the two countries are also competing for influence in Asia and beyond. China also wants to assert itself in India’s immediate neighbourhood. Both countries are trying to expand their influence in neighbouring countries (especially Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar). In many countries in the region, China’s economic footprint is larger than India’s (Saran, 2019).

China is now the world’s second-largest economy, but India has caught up with enormously high growth rates over the past two decades and ranks fifth in global economic output behind the United States, China, Japan and Germany. Building on this economic potential, the Indian government is now ambitiously putting forward its global aspirations.

The present relationship between China and India is shaped by several contradictory factors: The still unresolved border disputes remain a source of anxiety in India, as does China’s privileged relationship with Pakistan, especially Chinese assistance for Pakistan’s conventional armed forces. In addition, the status of Tibet remains contentious. China is particularly concerned about the rapprochement between India and the United States. The increased military presence in the Indian

Both countries are investing heavily in military capabilities—quantitatively in the number of soldiers and weapons and qualitatively through the constant modernisation of their armed forces.

Ocean and both governments' geopolitical ambitions are worrying. China has long since taken its place in the concert of great powers, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, as one of the recognised five nuclear powers and as a dominant economic power. Building on its phenomenal economic growth, India is pushing for an equal say at the high table of global politics.

This *bicc report* will begin by outlining the long-standing and still threatening conflicts that stem in part from the disorderly withdrawal of colonial power Great Britain, particularly the border disputes in the Himalayas and India's complicated relationship with Pakistan. In the next section, I describe the current military balance between India and China and analyse China's advance in the Indian Ocean and the concerns it has raised in India. A third section examines economic co-operation between the two countries, which is problematic from India's perspective. The fourth section is mainly devoted to recent developments: the impact of the New Silk Road, the West's attempts to win over India in its conflict with China and India's ambitions to play a greater role in the concert of the big powers. The final section examines the consequences of the dangerous competition between the two Asian super-powers and the possibilities of avoiding a collision. ●

Conflict, Competition, Cooperation & Collision

The border conflict has been going on for more than a century. To understand it, it is worth looking back. Relations have not always been as strained as they are today. On the contrary, after the end of the colonial period, there were 'fraternal relations' between the newly independent countries.

The Sino–Indian Agreement of 1954 encompassed the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, also known as “*Panchsheel*” in India.³ Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, described it as “Hindi–Chini bhai bhai” (Indians and Chinese are brothers) (Nehru, 1961, pp. 99–102).

Taxing Conflicts

Conflict-ridden Colonial Legacy

The Hindi–Chini bhai bhai soon became Hindi–Chini bye bye. India and China fought a bitter war in the Himalayas in 1962, in which India suffered a crushing defeat with heavy casualties. The war ended disastrously for India, and the psychological impact is still felt today in discussions in India about its relationship with China. At the end of the colonial era, when Great Britain granted independence to the Indian subcontinent in 1947, not only did the division into India and Pakistan leave a festering wound, but the border between China and India also remained disputed and was left as an ‘undefined’ border (Bai, 2012). The borders remained contested; they were a mere post-colonial messiness (George, 1984, p. 3). In today’s border disputes, different maps and different interpretations of maps still play a role in backing up one’s territorial claims (Khatri, 2021).

The contested territories involve three areas. First, the Western Sector, called Aksai Chin; second, the Eastern Sector, which includes the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, where China claims that large parts of the territory are part of Tibet. The third area, the Middle Sector, is less contentious. To this day, the boundary conventions are interpreted differently in India and China.

³ From Sanskrit = five principles.

⁴ Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs. https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/191_panchsheel.pdf.



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“PANCHSHEEL”: FIVE PRINCIPLES OF PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE

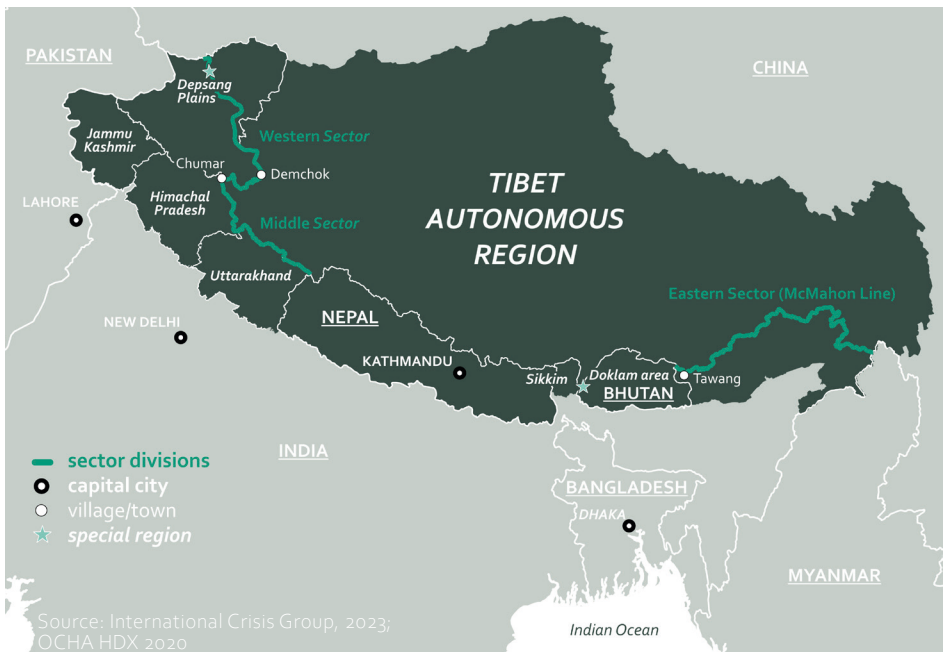
Panchsheel, or Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, were first formally enunciated in the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India (the Sino-Indian Agreement) signed on 29 April 1954, which stated, in its preamble, that the two Governments have resolved to enter into the present Agreement based on the following principles:

- Mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty,
- Mutual non-aggression,
- Mutual non-interference,
- Equality and mutual benefit, and
- Peaceful co-existence.⁴

The boundary in the Western Sector is based on the so-called Johnson's Line of the 1860s. Independent India accepted this Johnson Line and claimed the Aksai Chin area for itself. Initially, China raised no objections. However, it later stressed that it had never recognised this border (Bhonsale, 2018). In 1914, the McMahon Line (one of the results of the Simla Convention), which marked the boundary between Tibet and India, was agreed. It runs along the highest peaks in the Himalayas. India maintains that the border is regulated by the Simla Convention. China, however, which was not a party to the agreement, therefore rejected it on the grounds that Tibet was not a sovereign state at the time and should not have signed it in the first place.

Over the past decades, the two governments have engaged in border talks, negotiations, working groups and different types of dispute settlement. Despite these efforts, several military

MAP 1
LINE OF ACTUAL CONTROL DIVIDING INDIA AND CHINA



⁵ Johnson was a British cartographer.

standoffs in the Himalayas (as detailed below) have shown that border issues remain contentious, with neither side willing to give up its claim to the territory. Various governments, including the Modi government, have sought avenues for co-operation, but have also been firm, criticising China’s “mindset of expansion” (Roy-Chaudhury, 2015, p. 98). The other major colonial legacy that can still be felt today is the partition of the subcontinent and the resulting complicated relationship between Pakistan and India. It affects India–China relations because of the long-standing friendship between China and Pakistan.⁶ ●

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⁶ This aspect is analysed below.

Although the border conflict in the Himalayas strained relations between India and China, Nehru tried to restore the old pre-colonial good relations. He saw China as a “geo-civilisational equal”, a potential friend (Banerjee, 2022, p. 632). This cosmopolitan view goes back to the ideas of the philosopher and writer Rabindranath Tagore and to Mahatma Gandhi. China and India could be seen as co-leaders working jointly for world progress. Both should act as independent global powers. In contrast, the great power world view, already present in Nehru’s ideas, carries with it the potential for rivalry (Bajpai, 2021, p. 49).

The Ups and Downs: Territorial Conflicts in the Himalayas

In the border conflict, China claimed some 50,000 square miles of territory and occupied Tibet in 1950 (Khatri, 2021). India rejected China’s claims to sovereignty over Tibet. Tensions rose, but eventually, India formally accepted Chinese sovereignty in Tibet in 1952. The year 1959 was a watershed. Following an uprising against Chinese rule in Tibet, the Dalai Lama fled to India. As the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) fought the insurgents, skirmishes broke out between Indian and Chinese armed forces. Joint meetings to resolve the differences “failed spectacularly” (Malone, 2011, p. 133). India set up military posts along the disputed border, and China responded in a tit-for-tat manner, insisting that it “no longer tolerated Indian efforts of occupying PRC-claimed territory” (Balzac, 2020, p. 544). China was literally occupying disputed territory.

This eventually led to the 1962 Indo–China war. Interestingly, the international response to this war was limited. This is because China—intentionally or by default—timed the attack to coincide with the preoccupation of the two superpowers of the time, the United States and the Soviet Union, with their nuclear showdown in October 1962, known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. But the military defeat in the 1962 Sino–Indo

war created a trauma that is still palpable today when Indian foreign policy gurus analyse Sino–Indian relations (Maxwell, 1972).

The following timeline (p. 16) shows the ups and downs of China–India relations. In 1965, India was not only at war with Pakistan over Kashmir but was also on the brink of war with China. The situation was a

litmus test of the already established USA–Pakistan relationship as well as the new Sino–Pakistani relationship. When the USA declared neutrality [in the India–Pakistan war] and blocked military transfers to both India and Pakistan, the latter turned to China for assistance and received it in generous amounts (Malone, 2011, p. 134).

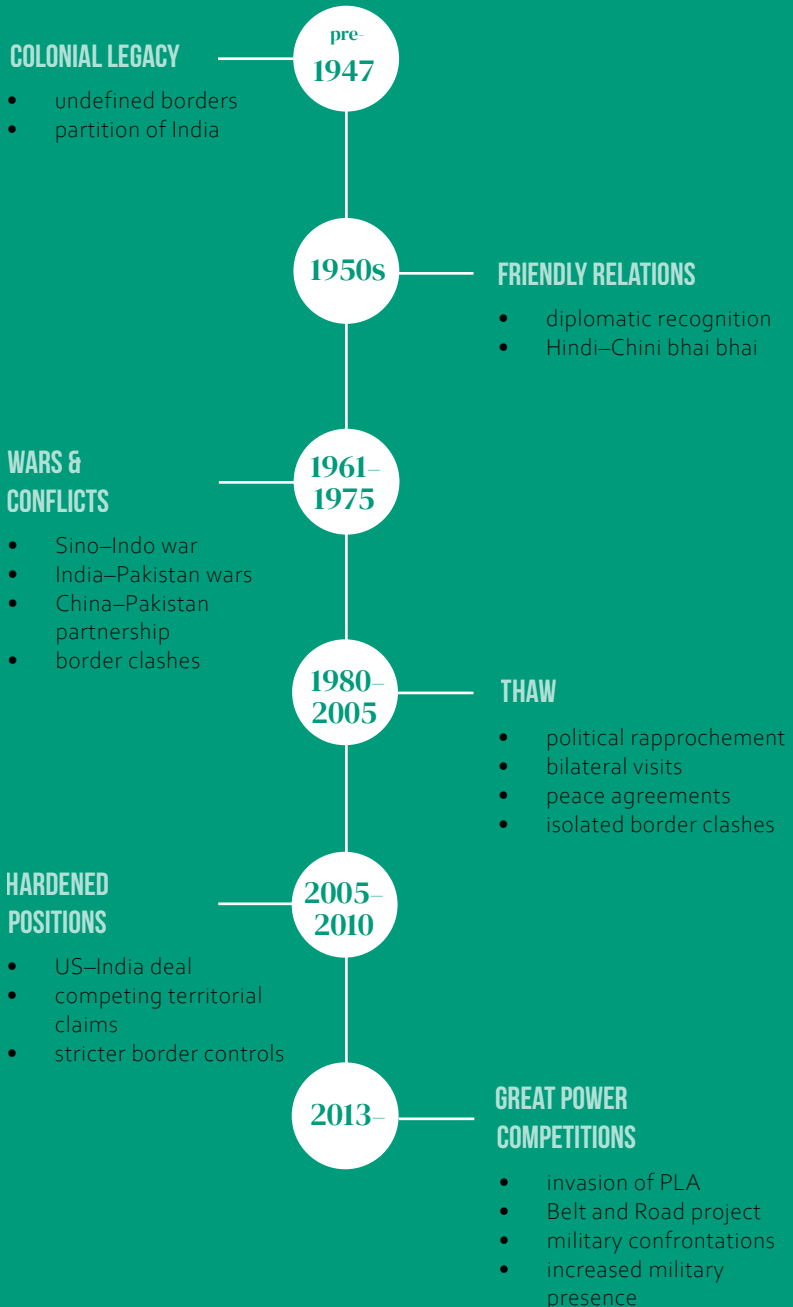
In 1965, India was not only at war with Pakistan over Kashmir but was also on the brink of war with China.

Fearing a second front with China, India turned to the Soviet Union. “Ultimately it required US intervention and a UN resolution calling for a ceasefire to discourage Chinese involvement” (Malone, 2011, p. 135).

The 1971 Bangladesh War, called the Liberation War by the Bangladeshis, was the result of an internal crisis in Pakistan, but it affected India as millions of refugees crossed the border (Pattanaik, 2021, p. 628). The US and the Chinese governments tried to put pressure on India not to support the liberation movement in East Pakistan (Bangladesh). In response to and as a result, the governments of India and the Soviet Union signed the Indo–Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation in August 1971. The period of the two wars in 1965 and 1971 was characterised by an arms race (both conventional and nuclear) between India and Pakistan and China. It was a typical security dilemma behaviour. Action by one side was followed by a reaction by the other.

The era of tension and military hostilities was not over. Sikkim, a princely state of the British Empire, continued its status as a protectorate of India at the end of British colonial

FIGURE 1
ROLLER-COASTER RELATIONS



Source: author's compilation (for a more detailed table see the Annex.)

rule. India sent troops into the neighbouring country in 1973 and integrated Sikkim as an Indian state in 1975 over China's loud protests. The *cordon sanitaire*, consisting of Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim, was hoped to ensure that there would be no armed conflict between India and China along much of the border. But with this buffer gone, Indian and Chinese troops once again found themselves face-to-face with each other.

The period of armed conflict and tension in the 1960s and 1970s has been replaced by a cautious political rapprochement. Both sides were not looking for war. They wanted dialogue and sought confidence-building measures on the border with bilateral agreements signed in 1993, 1996, 2005, 2012 and 2013 (Bhonsale, 2023). Bilateral visits by high-level politicians, including the heads of government, the establishment of working groups to clarify the course of the borders and the creation of exchange forums between the militaries on both sides led to a period of thaw. At the same time, however, there were still mostly isolated border confrontations (Kumar, 2023). It was also the period in which both China and India strengthened infrastructure in the areas along the border, primarily for military purposes.

From the mid-2000s, positions hardened again. In 2006, China's Ambassador to India, Sun Yuxi, claimed in a media interview: "In our position, the whole of the state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory... We are claiming all of that. That is our position."⁷ China's tougher policy was a reaction to India's security co-operation with the United States, signed in 2005. The so-called nuclear deal of 2005 ended a three-decade moratorium on nuclear trade with India and gave India access to non-military nuclear technology and led to unprecedented progress in US–India foreign relations (Bajoria & Pan, 2010). This Indo–US rapprochement has been possible despite India's continued push to advance its nuclear weapon program. The US administration under President Bush (junior) saw India as a rising power that could help shape the balance of power in

⁷ Quoted in: *Hindustan Times*, 19 November 2006, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/china-lays-claim-to-arunachal/story-QDVTkQ1kDNBBfgQMvsDdBM.html>

Asia in favour of the United States. It was a major geopolitical shift in US foreign policy that strengthened India's role in the Indo–Pacific (Mohan, 2012, p. 46). The United States and India have an interest in hedging against an assertive China.

Two clashes have contributed to a further deterioration in Indo–Chinese relations in the last decade: the so-called Doklam standoff in summer 2017 and the Galwan conflict in 2020.

An assertive Chinese foreign policy on the one hand, and the ever-increasing cooperation between the United States and India on the other, have played an important role in the growing tensions.

An assertive Chinese foreign policy on the one hand, and the ever-increasing co-operation between the United States and India on the other, have played an important role in the growing tensions. In 2016, the United States and India signed an agreement making India a 'Major Defense Partner', a status "unique to India" (U.S. Department of Defense, 2016).

India is also a member, along with the United States, Japan and Australia, of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a grouping that China has accused of being biased against it. Quad was originally established in 2007 but was revived in 2017, especially by the United States, as a tool to contain China's influence in the Pacific. The United States wants to draw India into the Western fold and has approved far-reaching agreements for the sale and manufacture of US weapons in India. The Modi government in New Delhi maintains good relations with the United States but does not want to be used for US-American interests. It is very wary of US global policies and is trying to walk a diplomatic tightrope.

The 72-day Doklam standoff between the Indian Army and the PLA in June to August 2017 marked a new low in their relationship, a sharp decline even compared to the complicated relations of previous decades. At Doklam, "a strategic location at the trijunction where India, China and Bhutan meet, ... Indian and Chinese troops formed human chains to stare each other down" (International Crisis Group 2023, pp. I and II). The 2017 tensions were resolved without a shot being fired, but at the time, commentators asked: "Are China and India on the brink of war?" (Zhang, 2017).

During the 2020 clash at Galwan along the line of actual control (LAC), the military conflicts did not end so lightly. Fighting broke out in June, despite an agreement between the armed forces not to engage in the area. Chinese troops marched across the border, and the clashes were the worst since the 1962 war. China and India mobilised and deployed large numbers of troops. Twenty Indian soldiers and four Chinese were killed in hand-to-hand combat.

Both sides accused the other of violating existing agreements, presenting one-sided historical or unacceptable new maps of the border region, redeploying troops and encroaching on disputed territory. Some twenty rounds of military talks were held in an attempt to agree terms for a disengagement along the disputed border. But beyond the casualties, the psychological impact was not to be underestimated. The Galwan clashes “sent shockwaves across India” (Shivamurthy, 2022, 2). On the positive side, in the 20th round of military talks, they reportedly agreed to avoid provocative actions and to discuss options for mutual reductions of troops along the LAC (Markey & Scobell, 2023).

There is deep mistrust, even hostility, between the governments. Therefore, the strengthening of the armed forces along the border and the improvement of the infrastructure in the inhospitable Himalayan region continue (Khan, 2022, p. 8). ●

The relationship between Pakistan and India is fraught with resentment and mistrust and shaped by four wars. The political marginalisation of Muslims by British colonial rule led Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, and his Muslim League to promote a two-nation theory in the 1940s, which became reality in 1947. According to Tasleem, “The haphazard partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 contained within it the seeds of territorial conflict between the two sides that resulted in mutual mistrust, suspicion, and eventually outright hostility” (2023, p. 4).

China’s Friendship with India’s “Arch-enemy” Pakistan⁸

It is estimated that more than ten million people on both sides of the India–Pakistan border faced resettlement, displacement and deportation. More than one million people died in the excesses of violence. Since the partition of the country, which ended in war, the two neighbours have fought three more wars: two over Kashmir in 1965 and 1999 and one over the separation of what is now Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan, in 1971. Occasional glimmers of hope for improved political relations have been repeatedly dashed. Successive governments have negotiated to resolve the outstanding conflicts. While some agreements have been reached such as the opening of an Indo–Pakistani bus service and the Indus Waters Treaty, “the overall relationship never improved fundamentally for long” (Malone, 2011, p. 107). This sobering conclusion from more than a decade ago still holds true today, even though Indian Prime Minister Modi, upon taking office in 2014, announced that he wanted to significantly improve relations with his neighbour and propagated an ambitious

⁸ The term ‘arch-enemy’ is still used occasionally in the press, see for example the Indian Newspaper *The Economic Times*, 9 May 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/why-is-pakistan-government-gunning-for-imran-khan/articleshow/100105301.cms?from=mdr>. Even the international press used this term, see for example the Australian paper *The Strategist*, 11 March 2022, <https://www.aspistrate-gist.org.au/pakistans-fence-sitting-on-ukraine-is-being-noticed-internationally/>.

programme of “neighbourhood first” (Bhatnagar & Passi, 2016). This has in no way led to a reduction in tensions in India–Pakistan relations.

The unresolved Kashmir conflict, with territorial claims by both sides and calls for autonomy from within Kashmir, and terrorist attacks on India launched from Pakistan, have repeatedly reignited tensions between India and Pakistan. The fractured relationship between the two countries is further complicated by decades of Chinese support for Pakistan. Pakistan has looked to China as a diplomatic protector and a counterweight to India. The two countries have maintained a relationship since the 1950s. In the Indo–Pakistani wars of 1965, 1971 and 1999, China supported Pakistan—diplomatically and with military aid. Referring to these three wars, Small speaks of “a friendship forged by war” (2015, pp. 9–26). Other observers call it an “iron-clad” and “all-weather” friendship (Fazli, 2022, pp. 5; 6).

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At the time of the 1971 war, the Nixon administration encouraged the Chinese to deploy troops in the Himalayas to forestall Indian intervention on behalf of the East Pakistani insurgents. Pakistan publicly expressed and appreciated Chinese support, but it was thin on the ground and “fell well short of what many in Pakistan had hoped for...” (Small, 2015, p. 16). According to Yahya Khan, former Commander-in-Chief of Pakistan’s armed forces and later Head of Government, China would “continue to support Pakistan morally, economically, and politically, but its capability to intervene militarily in the 1971 war was limited.”⁹

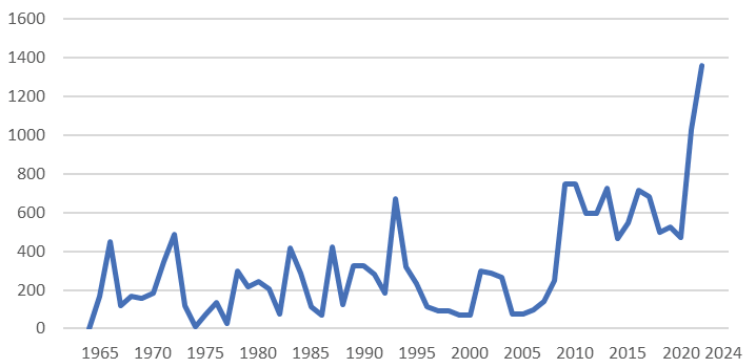
Close ties have now lasted for over six decades, and China has become Pakistan’s reliable backer. Chinese assistance to Pakistan began in the military sphere in 1964 with a “modest programme of military transfers from China to Pakistan” (Malone, 2011, p. 134). Throughout the period 1964 to 2022, China emerged as the largest exporter of arms to Pakistan, accounting for almost half of all Pakistan’s major arms imports.

⁹ Quoted from Khan’s memoirs by Small, 2015, p. 14.

This share has increased significantly in the last five years to almost three quarters.¹⁰ Pakistani arms imports from China have included a wide range of major advanced weapons systems: fighter aircraft, naval vessels such as submarines and frigates and land systems. Some of the deals are co-production or joint venture programs with production facilities in Pakistan. One of the most significant programs is the licensed production of the Chinese JF-17 combat aircraft in Pakistan. This is accompanied by various types of guided bombs and air-to-ground missiles, as well as advanced long-range air-to-air missiles.

This co-operation is the backbone of Pakistan’s military build-up and a source of concern for India. A former Pakistani ambassador to the United States, Hussain Haqqani, emphasised the importance of the Pakistani–China friendship: “For China, Pakistan is a low-cost secondary deterrent to India, and for Pakistan, China is a high-value guarantor of security against India” (Fazli, 2022, p. 9).

FIGURE 2
CHINESE WEAPONS TRANSFERS TO PAKISTAN 1964–2002



in millions of US dollars

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php

¹⁰ SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php

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China announced its China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project in the mid-2010s as the centrepiece of its global New Silk Road project.

For a long time during the Cold War, the United States supported Pakistan with military aid. President Nixon used Pakistan’s good contacts with Beijing to begin his secret talks on normalising US–China relations in 1971. US–Pakistan, China–Pakistan and US–India relations reacted like communicating vessels. As the United States reduced its involvement in Pakistan, Beijing’s influence grew. After the Bangladesh Liberation War, when the United States supported Pakistan only indirectly, for example by allowing Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to send US-American arms to assist Pakistan, and especially at the beginning of the US presidency of Jimmy Carter (1977–1981), Pakistan–US relations soured. Carter was concerned about Pakistan’s nuclear ambitions and the India–Pakistan rivalry. But the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 led to a change in policy. US–Pakistani relations improved. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the Tiananmen Square protests ten years later “both Sino-US relations and US-Pakistan relations took a sharply negative turn” again (Small, 2015, p. 145). US-American priorities favoured India with the 2005 agreement. Although Pakistan was not a top priority and the US–Pakistan relations cooled down, Pakistan offered itself as a crucial ally in the so-called War against Terror (Small, 2015, p. 10).

China announced its China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project in the mid-2010s as the centrepiece of its global New Silk Road project. Until then, relations had been limited almost exclusively to military and security policy. The primary goal was not economic co-operation, as Chinese scientist Ye Hailin noted in 2009:

The objective has not been to strengthen the two countries’ welfare interests but to strengthen them against common threats. It should be described as a shield to protect their traditional security interests rather than a bridge to lead to common prosperity and wealth (quoted in Small, 2015, p. 83).

Although the project is called an 'economic corridor', Beijing's strategic interests are clear (Baloch, 2017, p. 139): This Chinese focus on security, including cooperation in Pakistan's nuclear program, has now shifted somewhat. While the CPEC is of economic interest to Pakistan, it plays an important role for China, both militarily and economically. The project envisages a network of roads, railways, pipelines, power plants and the Pakistani port in Gwadar, which was originally planned to cost US \$45 billion but has now risen to US \$62 billion.¹¹ According to the official CPEC website, most of the projects planned under Phase I have been completed.

This flagship project of the New Silk Road, linking China's and Pakistan's troubled provinces of Xinjiang and Baluchistan, ends at the Pakistani port of Gwadar, giving China direct access to the Indian Ocean.¹² "The aim is for China to strengthen its long-term geopolitical position vis-à-vis rivals (in this case India) without great risk..." (Garlick, 2018, p. 521). The CPEC is an alternative trade route for China in the event of a confrontation with the United States in the South China Sea (Hassan, 2020). ●

11 CPEC website https://cpec.gov.pk/brain/public/uploads/documents/CPEC-and-Pakistani-Economy_An-Appraisal.pdf

12 See for internal criticism in Pakistan, particularly in Baluchistan, Khan and Ahmed 2024.

Three indicators, the number of personnel in the armed forces, the number of nuclear warheads and the level of military expenditure, provide a rough overview of the military potential of the two countries. In each of these three quantitative indicators, China is clearly ahead of India.

Military Competition

Balance of Military Power

China and India maintain the two largest armed forces in the world. China's troop strength has grown to 2,035,000; India maintains 1,450,000 active troops in its armed forces. Both countries are investing heavily in modernising their armed forces to be at the cutting edge of technology.

China is estimated to have increased the number of its nuclear warheads from 350 to 410 by 2022.¹³ They can be delivered by land- and sea-based ballistic missiles and bombers. "Since the 1990s, China has continually modernised its nuclear forces, though the number and types of weapons fielded have expanded significantly in recent years."¹⁴ According to the Arms Control Association, China may even have as many as 500 nuclear warheads.¹⁵ India's nuclear arsenal has been primarily focused on deterring Pakistan, which has an estimated 170 nuclear warheads. Both Pakistan and India have been expanded their nuclear arsenals. India now appears to be emphasising the development of longer-range weapon delivery vehicles, adding a momentum of instability to the region.

China, the world's second largest military spender, and India, the fourth largest, are steadily increasing their military budgets.

13 <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2023/states-invest-nuclear-arsenals-geo-political-relations-deteriorate-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now>

14 Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweapons-whohaswhat>.

15 Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweapons-whohaswhat>.

But the growth of Chinese military expenditure far outstrips that of India, as Figure 3 illustrates. While they were roughly equal in the mid-1990s, China now spends three and a half times more than India. India spent 2.4 per cent of its GDP on defence in 2022 while China’s military budget was 1.6 per cent of its GDP. In particular, antagonisms with Pakistan and the ongoing territorial dispute with China have led all Indian governments over the past six or seven decades to invest heavily in modern equipped armed forces, including a seaborne naval capability that includes aircraft carriers. ●

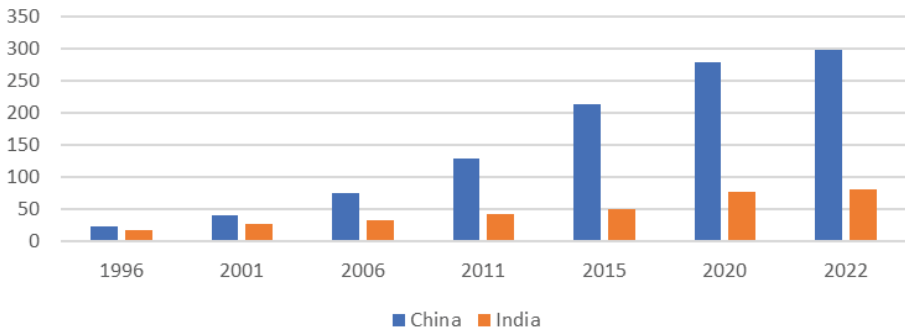
TABLE 1
BALANCE OF MILITARY POWER

	Armed Forces Personnel	Nuclear Warheads	Military Expenditures*
China	2,19 million	410	298
India	1,45 million	164	81

Source: Statista, <https://www.statista.com/chart/20403/largest-militaries-in-the-world-active-manpower/SIPRI>, <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri> Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Nuclearweaponswhohaswhat>

*In billions of US dollars

FIGURE 3
MILITARY EXPENDITURE: CHINA AND INDIA



in billions of US dollars

Source: SIPRI, <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>

When Indian Prime Minister Modi posted photos on social media in early 2024, he was seen strolling on a sandy beach, snorkelling in the water and meditating in a beach chair. The visit to the Lakshadweep archipelago in the Indian Ocean, which belongs to India, gave the impression of a relaxing holiday. But the waves were turbulent. In the Maldives, just a few dozen kilometres to the south, there were fears that Modi's promotion of the Lakshadweep Islands would lead to a decline in tourism. Members of the Maldivian government took to social media to denigrate Modi as a "clown," a "terrorist" and a "puppet of Israel."¹⁶

“String of Pearls” in the Indian Ocean

The public row is only superficially about tourism in the two archipelagos. The competition between India and China in the region is more geopolitical. Relations between India and the Maldives, long complicated, are at an all-time low. Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu called for the withdrawal of the Indian military, and while social media was buzzing about the interpretation of Modi's visit, China's President Xi received the pro-China Maldivian president in Beijing.

This rather bizarre viral exchange over a visit to a beach resort reflects the collision course between the two Asian superpowers. China's expansionist diplomatic, economic and maritime drive in the Indian Ocean region is increasingly seen as a risk in India. China's government is showing a high degree of assertiveness, even arrogance in promoting its New Silk Road. It is investing heavily in maritime infrastructure projects and, according to Indian analysts, has managed "to string together a patronage network of South Asian coastal nations..." (Mukherjee, 2018).

Indian strategists see the archipelago, traditionally considered part of "India's backyard" (Saran & Deo, 2018, p. 21), as a building block in China's maritime strategy:

¹⁶ See for example CNN January 9, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/01/09/india/maldives-india-modi-tourism-boycott-intl-hnk/index.html#:~:text=Modi%20did%20not%20mention%20India%27s,for%20vacation%20rather%20than%20Maldives.>

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China and India maintain the two largest armed forces in the world. China's troop strength has grown to 2,035,000; India maintains 1,450,000 active troops in its armed forces. Both countries are investing heavily in modernising their armed forces to be at the cutting edge of technology.

The Maldives has undoubtedly emerged as an important 'pearl' in China's 'String of Pearls' in South Asia. Given the island nation's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, Beijing has been vying for a maritime base in the atoll (Manoharan, 2016, p. 144).

China has invested heavily in the infrastructure of many ports in the Indian Ocean littoral states.

China has invested heavily in the infrastructure of many ports in the Indian Ocean littoral states. Already in the early 2000s, there was some unease in India about China's approach to modernising its naval forces and, more importantly, creating a network of ports in the Indian Ocean. Senior military officers warned of China's clear footprint in India's sphere of interest in the Indian Ocean region (Kapoor, 2012). Some even saw a "deliberate Chinese strategic encirclement of India" (Kumar & Kumar, 2010, p. 79). Security experts and foreign policy observers were already advising the Indian government to invest in becoming "an eminent maritime power" and to safeguard its core maritime interests (Vasan, 2012, p. 416). This advice was given with the aim of containing the Chinese presence through military diplomacy (Jha, 2011) and investment in India's naval forces (Athawale, 2012; Parmar, 2012). Others reached similar conclusions: "India's maritime strategy, if pursued with vigour, could give it considerable strategic advantage in Asia" and "(w)e should be in a position to dominate the Indian Ocean region" (Khilnani et al., 2012, pp. 12; 41).

China is involved in nearly two dozen ports in the Indian Ocean in a variety of ways, ranging from direct participation (e.g. Sudan Port) to PLA naval facilities (Doraleh Port, Djibouti) to leasing agreements (e.g. Gwadar Port, Pakistan and Hambantota Port, Sri Lanka), planning, construction and financing (e.g. Karachi Deepwater Port, Pakistan and Lamu Port, Kenya) and concession rights (e.g. Maldives).

India has several concerns about the Chinese presence. First, India has since long claimed a leadership role in the Indian Ocean region and is worried about encroachment into its sphere of interest. Indian security experts argue that China has "made inroads into India's traditional sphere of influence

TABLE 2:
CHINESE HARBOUR FACILITIES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN *

Port	Country	Comment
Kyaukpyu Port	Myanmar	Part of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)
Mongla Port	Bangladesh	Funded by China
Chittagong Port	Bangladesh	Run by Bangladesh, built for submarines supplied by China
Payra Port	Bangladesh	China Harbour Engineering Company and China State Construction Engineering Corporation
Hambantota Port	Sri Lanka	99-year lease
Colombo Port	Sri Lanka	Built by China Harbour Engineering Company
Male Port	Maldives	Docking rights for Chinese vessels
Gwadar Port	Pakistan	40-year concession
Karachi Deepwater Port	Pakistan	Built by China Harbour Engineering Company
Khalifa Port	UAE	35-year concession, used for military purposes
Sokhna Port	Egypt	Run by Chinese–Egyptian consortium
Doraleh Port	Djibouti	Partly reserved for Chinese Navy
Sudan Port	Sudan	49 per cent Chinese ownership
Massawa New Port	Eritrea	Built by China Harbour Engineering Company
Lamu Port	Kenya	Built by China Communications Construction Company, part of Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport Corridor
Mombasa Port	Kenya	Built by China Roads and Bridge Corporation
Zanzibar New Port	Tanzania	13 per cent Chinese ownership, built by China Harbour Engineering Company
Dar es Salam Port	Tanzania	Extension by China Harbour Engineering Company
Beira City Fishing Port	Mozambique	Built by China Harbour Engineering Company
Tamatave Port	Madagascar	Built by China Harbour Engineering Company
Port Durban	South Africa	Financed by Shanghai Zhenhua Heavy Industries
Richards Bay Port	South Africa	China Chery Holdings

* Partly funded, partly built, partly leased and run by China/Chinese companies.
Source: Author's compilation

in maritime South Asia” (Singh, 2018, p. 3). This concept of a ‘sphere of interest’ in India’s neighbourhood, a typically traditional geopolitical notion, is sometimes referred to as India’s “Monroe Doctrine” (Brewster, 2016, p. 11). It regards military involvement by ‘outside’ powers as illegitimate. The Indian official J. Malhotra admits that the days of such 19th-century concepts are over: “India cannot claim sole proprietorship of the region. We can’t stop what the Chinese are doing ... but we can tell them about our sensitivities, our lines of legitimacy” (quoted by Brewster, 2018, p. 12).

India’s second concern is economic competition with China in the Indian Ocean littoral states. The Middle East (known in India as West Asia), ASEAN, the Indian Ocean islands and the coast of East Africa are of great interest to India’s expanding economy and energy needs. China’s economic and political

MAP 2
CHINA’S FACILITIES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN



Source: author’s compilation partly based on R. Reddy (ORCA, 2022)

influence through its huge Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects is viewed with envy. Many of the smaller countries in the region have a great need for funds and investment. "China, with its large reserves and quest for investment opportunities, can be a possible source for such large funding. Indeed, recent developments indicate so" (Rangachari, 2016, p. 90).

This approach comes with strings attached, as China is increasingly influencing these countries' foreign and security policy options, possibly even eroding their fiscal and thus political sovereignty (Lintner, 2019, pp. 9; 30). Indian experts doubt China's oft-repeated altruistic intentions. "Using the Maritime Silk Road as a pretext for this strategy, China has established interdependencies between itself and various South Asian states" (Mukherjee, 2018).

The third Indian concern relates to China's possible strategic and military interests. In 2008, the PLA Navy deployed ships for the first time in an anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, and in 2014, it deployed submarines for this mission. A first overseas Chinese military facility was opened in Djibouti in 2017 (Baruah, 2023) and it appears that birthing rights are being granted in other ports. With this network, China is developing blue-water logistical capabilities for its Navy far from China's shores.

This strategic competition in the Indian Ocean is, of course, interpreted differently in China. While India sees China as a threat, China is more focused on its confrontational relationship with the United States. With its export-oriented economy and dependence on energy imports from the Middle East, China needs secure and stable trade routes. The Indian Ocean is a trade route of central importance for China.

In the early 2000s, Arun Prakash, a retired Indian admiral, suggested already that India's pre-eminent maritime power in the Indian Ocean should be strengthened for "sustained operations in our area of interest, including power projection" (quoted by Singh, A., 2012, p. 18). This is exactly what the

As the Chinese and Indian navies vie for influence in the Indian Ocean, the Indian government is trying to counter Chinese activities by entering into informal alliances with the United States and other Western-oriented countries.

Indian government is doing by procuring modern aircraft carriers, frigates and submarines. For the past two decades, India has been one of the world's largest weapons importers. As the Chinese and Indian navies vie for influence in the Indian Ocean, the Indian government is trying to counter Chinese activities by entering into informal alliances with the United States and other Western-oriented countries. Each year, for example, the Indian, US, Japanese and Australian navies conduct manoeuvres as part of the Malabar Exercise. The Indian government is pursuing a strategy of defence and, in particular, naval co-operation in the region to counter the Chinese activities, as well as economic co-operation. Prime Minister Modi stated in 2018:

We are advancing a comprehensive agenda of regional co-operation through the Indian Ocean Rim Association. And, we also work with partners beyond the Indian Ocean Region to ensure that the global transit routes remain peaceful and free for all.¹⁷

India has good relations with the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Co-operation (BIMSTEC) member countries Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The government has strengthened maritime ties with Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique and the Seychelles. The Indian Navy has also signed logistical co-operation agreements with France (for using French naval bases in the Indian Ocean) and Oman and has access to the US naval base at Diego Garcia. It is planning a military base in the Seychelles, has a listening post in Madagascar and dual-use logistics facilities in Mauritius (Mukherjee, 2018). ●

¹⁷ <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29943/Prime+Ministers+Key-note+Address+at+Shangri+La+Dialogue+June+01+2018>

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This strategic competition in the Indian Ocean is, of course, interpreted differently in China. While India sees China as a threat, China is more focused on its confrontational relationship with the United States.

Sino–Indian relations are not simply a source of conflict or geopolitical competition in which India seeks to establish a balance of power. Notwithstanding areas of conflict, cooperation in selected global and regional forums (such as climate change, trade issues within the WTO or global finance within the IMF, or in BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) has at times helped to improve strained relations.

Difficult Economic Cooperation: India's Dependence

The political ups and downs in Sino–Indian relations are also reflected in the two countries' approach towards economic cooperation.

India's bilateral trade has grown since India began to liberalise its economy in the early 1990s, and especially after China's huge economic growth. China has become India's largest trading partner, up from 13th place in 1997. Today about 15 per cent of India's total imports come from China, while only about four per cent of India's exports go to China. While India's imports from China have continued to grow over the past two decades, India's exports to China have stagnated since around 2010, and its trade deficit has widened considerably.

The political ups and downs in Sino–Indian relations are also reflected in the two countries' approach towards economic cooperation. Although bilateral trade between China and India has grown significantly since Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi normalised the relations during a visit to Beijing in 1988, the perceived competition between the two countries has intensified. President Xi's visit to India in 2014 and Prime Minister Modi's visit to China in 2015 emphasised that Chinese and Indian "development goals are interlinked and should be pursued in a mutually supportive manner" (Acharya, 2016, p. 71). However, such declarations of intent have not really been put into practice. Instead, competition has often prevailed. Today, the Indian government defines its interests in a broader regional and even

global context. Despite occasional mutually reinforcing policy signals from China and India, the two countries' interest in Asia and global ambitions have turned them into fierce competitors.

As in the United States and Europe, expectations of cooperation with China are much more pessimistic than before.

On the economic and trade front, the numbers tell an obvious story about how China views the relationship with India: as a mere market for its manufactured industrial and consumer goods. China's mercantilism offers no room for partnership; only dependence. Despite multiple negotiations in which India has indicated its displeasure with the negative balance of trade, the difference has only gotten larger (Saran, 2019, p. 21).

And like other major economies, India is trying to pursue a policy of derisking. This is particularly true of the defence industry (Manca, 2023). Since 2023, trade growth has slowed somewhat, but China remains a top trading partner for India. Derisking and diversifying supply chains is not a quick fix. ●

FIGURE 4
INDIA'S EXPORTS AND IMPORTS WITH CHINA



Source: Govt. Of India, Dept. of Commerce, <https://tradedat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/icntq.asp> in billions of US dollars

The rivalry between the United States and China has been a key determinant of global politics and, to a certain extent, it has overshadowed the relationship between India and China. US–China relations are probably at their lowest point since the early 1970s. The drift towards blocs in the last decade is a threatening development. India is an attractive strategic partner in the global confrontation between the West and China and Russia. But India does not simply want to join the Western camp.

At the High Table of Global Affairs

Growing Competition and Partial Cooperation

The Indian government does not want to be drawn into the systemic conflict between democracies and autocratic regimes. It is pursuing a policy of multiple alliances, in keeping with India's traditional policy of non-alignment. Samir Saran, President of the Indian think tank Observer Research Foundation, argues that today's world is characterised by self-interest and speaks of "limited liability partnerships among nations" (2023). India instead wants to represent the Global South. This concept of multiple alliances allows Delhi to act as a mediator, thereby boosting its global role.

India criticises unfair global power relations while pushing for a more influential role at the political 'high table'. India's government made its reservations about too close a relationship with the West clear when it abstained from enforcing sanctions against Russia following the country's aggression against Ukraine. India is not interested in a revival of the old, Cold War era bloc confrontation, which is currently playing out in a different format in the competition and conflict between

the United States and China and the West's attempts to isolate Russia. Although India is a member of the 'Quad' security dialogue between the United States, Australia, Japan and India, it wishes to maintain its autonomy. It consistently pursues a policy of equidistance—independence from both sides—and 'multiple alliances', in keeping with India's traditional policy of non-alignment.

India's Foreign Minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, has made it clear that India's concerns are different from those of the West. When the Indian government was accused of importing oil from Russia despite the sanctions, he said: "We are a USD 2,000 per capita economy. The oil price is breaking our back."¹⁸ Their own economic interests and security of supply outweigh their own pro-Western positions and participation in the sanctions. Why did India not give in to European and US pressure to join the sanctions? In June 2022, Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar criticised Western expectations: "Europe has to grow out of the mindset that its problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's" (quoted by Pant, 2022). Memories of the colonial era come to the fore, and it is no coincidence that the West is accused of double standards.

India and China co-operate in several multilateral organisations; the most important of which, besides the United Nations, is BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa by the end of 2023). India's and China's policies within the BRICS grouping vividly illustrate the complicated Indo–Chinese relationship of competition and co-operation. BRICS is an alliance of convenience, a loose grouping of countries dissatisfied with the Western-dominated world order. Today, BRICS has become an economic and global power factor because India and China, the two heavyweights in BRICS, are working together to transform the global economic order.

The Indian government does not want to be drawn into the systemic conflict between democracies and autocratic regimes.

¹⁸ <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/we-are-a-usd-2000-per-capita-economy-the-price-of-oil-is-breaking-our-back-says-s-jaishankar/cid/1889086>

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India criticises unfair global power relations while pushing for a more influential role at the political ‘high table’.

With varying degrees of vehemence, BRICS member states criticise the liberal narrative of democracy, human rights and a rules-based world order. In the Global South, the need for international norms, often presented top-down by Western governments, is reminiscent of the relationship between rulers and subordinates in the colonial era. And the Indian and Chinese governments are united in this criticism.

But BRICS also reflects deep asymmetries among its members. When the BRICS Development Bank was founded in 2014, it was a clear signal of dissatisfaction with institutions like the World Bank and the IMF. As the other BRICS members, including India, were unable to compete with China's financial resources, China became the dominant shareholder in the new development bank. China accounts for more than 70 per cent of the BRICS' economic output. GDP per capita in Russia and China is five times higher than in India. China and Russia are holding back the other three members' ambitions to become permanent members of the UN Security Council. Because conflicts between India and China, the two heavyweights in the club, have not been resolved, BRICS is less effective than it could be in transforming global politics.

China and Russia pushed for enlargement because they wanted to strengthen their challenge to the West.

Another example of India and China's divergent perspectives on BRICS co-operation is their view on BRICS enlargement. China and Russia pushed for enlargement because they wanted to strengthen their challenge to the West. The other three BRICS countries were more cautious, fearing that enlargement would reduce their influence in the group. The admittance of six countries is not surprising, but it is much more surprising that from a group of about 20 countries that showed interest (among them Indonesia, Thailand and Bangladesh in Asia or Nigeria and Algeria in Africa) not more were admitted. The opaque admission process reflects a conflict within BRICS and has the potential to weaken the group. Arrangements for future membership remain extremely vague.

India, with a population of 1.4 billion, overtook China as the world's most populous country in 2023.

China is undoubtedly a great power. It is the world's second-largest economy, a leading military power, a nuclear power, one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and a member of the Group of 20 (G20). China wants to further consolidate and expand its global position. President Xi Jinping's grand strategy is to rejuvenate the nation by leaving colonial trauma behind and reconnecting to the old greatness when China saw itself as the centre of civilisation, implying its superior role. In 2014, he said: "For Chinese people both at home and abroad, a united Chinese nation is our shared root, the profound Chinese culture is our shared soul, and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is our shared dream" (Varrall, 2015, p. 14) The New Silk Road project plays a crucial role in this vision.

India, with a population of 1.4 billion, overtook China as the world's most populous country in 2023. It is the world's fifth-largest economy with high growth rates. It is also a nuclear power, although not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. India is a member of the G20 (and chaired the Group in 2023), but despite decades of efforts, India is not a permanent member of the UN Security Council. India wants to strengthen its role in the concert of the big powers, and its government has an ambitious vision to transform the nation into a developed entity by the centenary of its independence in 2047. Prime Minister Modi speaks of a "quantum leap".¹⁹ These ambitions have significant implications for the global order, challenging its largely Western-influenced structure. They also have an impact on relations between the two countries, as they are not without tension, often in competition and full of conflict. A collision with far-reaching negative consequences cannot be ruled out. ●

19 <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaselframePage.aspx?PRID=1985077>.

The New Silk Road: China's Geopolitical Nationalistic Agenda or Global Cooperation Strategy?

The Chinese government's official 2023 Belt Road Initiative White Paper, released ten years after the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), states in its preamble:

In March 2013, President Xi Jinping proposed the vision of a global community of shared future ... The Belt and Road Initiative is a creative development that takes on and carries forward the spirit of the ancient silk routes—two of the great achievements in human history and civilisation. It enriches the ancient spirit with the zeitgeist and culture of the new era, and provides a platform for building a global community of shared future (Government of China, 2023).

The New Silk Road is officially presented as a co-operative and integrative project, “proposed by China but belonging to the whole world” (Government of China, 2023).

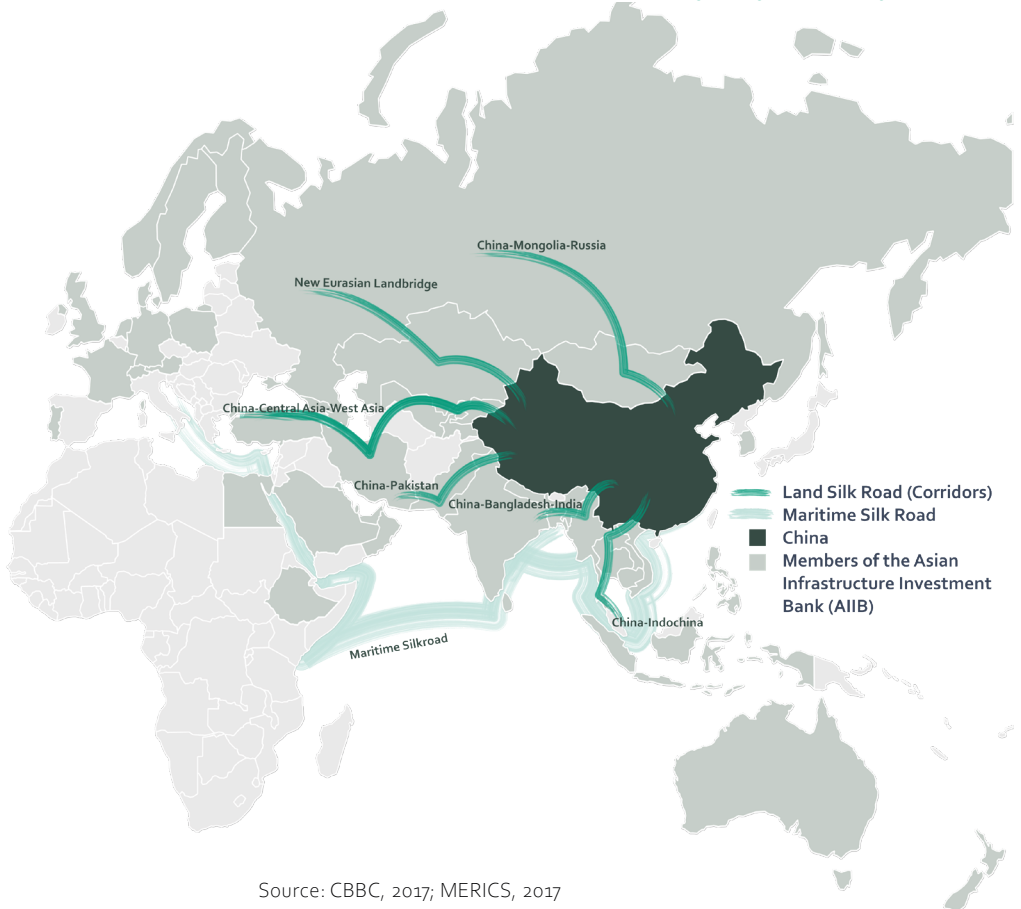
According to Lim, the BRI is “not merely an infrastructure project, but ... a complex and multi-dimensional initiative intersecting with a range of global issues—from governance and diplomacy to technology and sustainability” (2023). It is a key element of China's strategy to extend its reach across three continents via maritime routes, rail and road links. Some 140 countries are involved to varying degrees, and Beijing enthusiastically describes it as a ‘win-win’ initiative in a ‘changing multipolar’ world (Bastian, 2023, p. 20).

The Chinese White Paper states that China has pledged some US \$225 billion for over 70 large-scale projects between 2015 and 2023 (Government of China, 2023, Figure 3).

It is a key element of China's strategy to extend its reach across three continents via maritime routes, rail and road links.

The Chinese interpretation of the project emphasises its many tangible results that may have lasting effects on the social and economic development of host countries and on the geopolitical dynamics of the world. Its emergence in international political discourse is changing the basic thinking and logic of traditional geopolitical competition. While Western countries tend to interpret the BRI as part of China's hidden geopolitical strategy to ultimately rule the world, Chinese and most developing nations see it as China's international co-operation strategy to enhance global connectivity, communication and cooperation (Zhexin, 2018, p. 327).

MAP 3
CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE



Source: CBBC, 2017; MERICS, 2017

This reassuring rhetoric is met with deep scepticism in the West, for the New Silk Road project can also be interpreted as a geopolitical strategy to expand China's global influence. The project began as a vague proposal without a detailed concept.

Of course, the criticism of expanding Chinese influence in the world is rejected in China: "However, it is not meant to expand China's sphere of influence, nor as a geopolitical strategy to compete with the United States or any other country for regional dominance" (Zhixin, 2018 p. 332). The BRI was a response to US President Barack Obama's strategy of 'rebalancing' in Asia. In the early 2010s, Obama presented a "Pivot to East Asia" concept that emphasised the United States' focus on Asia and aimed to strengthen security co-operation (Lieberthal, 2011).

The contrast between China's assertive foreign and military policies and actions and its reassuring rhetoric cannot be ignored. On the one hand, the BRI White Paper speaks of 'shared benefits', 'open, green and clean cooperation', 'sustainability', 'better lives' and 'global wellbeing'. On the other hand, China's escalatory actions and claims in the South China Sea and its maritime presence in other regions are leading to constant conflict, including the occasional deployment of armed forces.

Many countries are now heavily indebted to China. Some are unable to repay their debts. The Times of India headlined: "The new colonialism: China's BRI or Silk Road project is coming to be seen across Asia as the road to ruin."²⁰ The high level of debt services and China's "debt diplomacy" (Lim, 2023) has already had consequences in some countries: For example, Hambantota International Port in Sri Lanka and Gwadar seaport in Pakistan have been leased to China on a long-term basis.

Many countries are now heavily indebted to China. Some are unable to repay their debts.

²⁰ *The Times of India*, 24 August 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/the-new-colonialism-chinas-bri-or-silk-road-project-is-coming-to-be-seen-across-asia-as-the-road-to-ruin/>

China's assertive policies and the vulnerability of global supply chains, highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to a policy of decoupling in other countries. The idea is to regain control of supply and production chains. This policy was first introduced by former US President Donald Trump. Particularly in the case of critical technologies, the United States is pursuing a robust policy of decoupling and has introduced far-reaching export controls to deprive its global political adversary of crucial high technology. Trump's policy was based on the assessment "that China's gains in overall national power came at America's expense, and unless China was stopped or slowed, it could eclipse the United States and impose its own vision and values on the international system" (Hass, 2020). In dealing with China, the Biden administration, has changed its tone compared to the Trump administration, but in substance China is seen as the dangerous challenger to the United States' global role.

In dealing with China, the Biden administration, has changed its tone compared to the Trump administration, but in substance China is seen as the dangerous challenger to the United States' global role.

This is reminiscent of classic power politics and geopolitical spheres of interest. President Joe Biden changed this policy in tone but not in substance. In 2022, the US administration presented its Indo-Pacific strategy, emphasising the importance of the Indo-Pacific as "vital to our security and prosperity" (President of the United States, 2022, p. 4).

The European Union stuck to the formula it has been propagating for several years: China is a partner, a competitor but also a systemic rival. In a keynote speech in March 2023 before a trip to Beijing, E.U. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen spoke of "derisking" rather than "decoupling".²¹ Western apprehensions towards China are underlined by the fact that the European Union is also pursuing an Indo-Pacific strategy, endorsed by its member states in 2021. It uses much the same language as the United States: "The European Union and the Indo-Pacific countries have a stake in each other's prosperity and security" (European Union, 2024). This is the context in which India seeks to emphasise its own independent position vis-à-vis China.

21 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_2063

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Many countries are now heavily indebted to China. Some are unable to repay their debts. The Times of India headlined: “The new colonialism: China’s BRI or Silk Road project is coming to be seen across Asia as the road to ruin.”

The security concerns and objections revolve around the orientation of China's BRI, particularly its maritime presence in some 40 seaports in almost three dozen countries (from Pakistan to Sri Lanka, from Djibouti to Piraeus). China dismisses this Angst as irrelevant, according to a fellow of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies:

Although such worries are unfounded—the Chinese government has never come to the thought of establishing overseas naval bases, nor would any host country allow China's absolute control of its seaports and thus become a frontline for major-power confrontation, China has indeed used many of those seaports for naval supplies on commercial escort and international peace-keeping missions in the past years. As China's navy continues growing and conducts more overseas exercises, the military significance of those seaports will become more prominent. The long-term security implication of the BRI, however, lies in its potential to help strengthen security co-operation between China and BRI-covered countries and thus foster new security mechanisms outside of the US dominance (Zhexin, 2018, p. 340).

Some of the ambitious projects have “encountered ‘insurmountable problems,’ ranging from cancellations to indefinite delays” (Lim, 2023). This is unlikely to stop China's global ambitions. But it seems open to interpretation whether the BRI is seen as the initiative for a global ‘shared future’ or as part of China's ‘grand strategy’ to rejuvenate China as the ‘Middle Kingdom’. The concept of the ‘Middle Kingdom’ is deeply rooted in Chinese history and continues to influence China's domestic and foreign policies. National pride is important. President Xi has said that China has promoted its “economic, scientific, technological, military, and comprehensive national power” so that it entered into the leading ranks of the world ... The Chinese Nation, with an entirely new posture, now stands tall and firm in the East” (quoted by Rudd, 2022, p. 16). ●

Having a Say with the ‘Big Boys’: India’s Global Aspirations

Given India’s civilisational status and long record as a stable democracy, the Indian political elite has always envisioned itself as a leading player in global affairs. Jawaharlal Nehru himself confidently stated this ambition:

India is too big a country herself to be bound down to any country, however big it may be. India is going to be and is bound to be a country that counts in world affairs, not I hope in the military sense, but in many other senses which are more important and effective in the end (1961, p. 47).

It has long been India’s wish to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. India believes that this is not only legitimate but also long overdue (Khilnani et al., 2012, p. 34; Thakur, 2011).

Its insistence on being a nuclear weapon power,²² its high annual growth in investment in conventional weapons, its naval push in the Indian Ocean, and its pro-active diplomacy are instruments to underline India’s global ambitions while signalling to its neighbours its claim to regional leadership, if not dominance. As former Army Chief of Staff and former Member of Parliament, Shankar Roychowdhury, wrote in 2013, referring to India’s nuclear power: “India is in the big boys club, and must carry its own big stick.”²³

In 2001, Stephen Cohen, a US expert on India, described India’s global ambitions as “an unrealistic combination of arrogance and poverty” (2001, p. 66). While this may have been a sober assessment over 20 years ago, it is certainly not the case today. India’s prowess and diplomatic determination

22 India is not a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, thus not recognized as a nuclear power. In practice, however, India has developed an arsenal of nuclear weapons.

23 <https://www.asianage.com/columnists/nuclear-realities-600..>

show an extraordinary degree of vigour and tenacity. The Modi government, in power since 2014, “has sought to transform India from being merely an important player in the global order into one that is willing—and *able*—to define the priorities of the international system” (Pant, 2019, p. 5). This has always been the credo of Modi’s Hindu nationalist party, the Bharat Janata Party (BJP). Its 2014 manifesto states: “BJP believes resurgent India must get its rightful place in the community of nations and international institutions” (quoted in Konwer, 2018, p. 234).

Three recent developments contribute to India’s current global political ascent: India’s chairmanship of the G20 countries in 2023, interestingly India’s position on the war in Ukraine, and the increasingly widespread critical view of China.

The current government has an ambitious vision of a self-reliant India. Modi first used the phrase in public in 2020: “The state of the world today teaches us that a (AtmaNirbhar Bharat) ‘Self-reliant India’ is the only path.”²⁴ Development, economic growth, environmental sustainability, international standing, a resilient society, etc.: India “is brimming with self-confidence and self-reliance”, according to the Prime Minister.²⁵ India’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jaishankar (2024), in his book *Why Bharat Matters* speaks of a new India that is able to define its own interests, articulate its own positions, find its own solutions and advance its own model.

Three recent developments contribute to India’s current global political ascent: India’s chairmanship of the G20 countries in 2023, interestingly India’s position on the war in Ukraine, and the increasingly widespread critical view of China.

Delhi saw the 2023 G20 chairmanship and the opportunity to shape the G20 agenda as a historic opportunity. It was perhaps a small compensation for the fact that India had been and still is being denied a permanent seat on the UN Security Council for decades. India wants to reform the largely Western-dominated global architecture and is not afraid to express its dissatisfaction with the work and composition of many global political and economic forums (such as the World Bank, IMF and UN Security Council). The Indian government wants

24 <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1623418>.

25 <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/india-brimming-with-self-confidence-imbued-with-spirit-of-self-reliance-pm-modi-news-339989>.

the 'unheard voices' of the Global South to be recognised to ensure inclusive growth amidst economic worries. With its phenomenal economic growth, which, with some fluctuations, has exceeded seven per cent per annum since the late 2000s, India has long since left "the claustrophobic confines of South Asia" (Gupta, 1997, p. 309).

India is benefiting from the current widespread scepticism about China's policies, and the pandemic has contributed to India's growing influence. During the pandemic, it became clear how strong, almost inescapable the economic dependencies on China are. China's assertive foreign policy, Beijing's lack of transparency in its handling of the COVID-19 crisis and the disruption of various supply chains and technological dependencies in key economic areas have led to a review and partial reversal of previous policies vis-à-vis China. India stands to gain politically and economically from this shift in the world order. But not everyone in India is as optimistic as Prime Minister Modi that India's path to global greatness is indispensable. Some see China as a potential stumbling block. "China is likely to continue to obstruct India ... and its capacity to do so will only grow as its power increases" (Rajagopalan, 2017, p. 6).

In the current global environment, India seems well-positioned to be a preferred partner for the West as shared democratic values could create a sense of 'like-mindedness'. But politically, India is at a crossroads. India's secular society and multicultural democracy are no longer as stable as envisaged in the constitution. Prime Minister Modi's policy of a Hindu renaissance, a homogeneous Hindu society, calls into question the equal treatment of citizens. The liberalism and secularism that have characterised Indian society are under threat, as is the independence of the judiciary and the media (Roy, 2020). At the World Economic Forum in 2018, Modi claimed that India's democracy is a "force of stability" in an uncertain world (quoted by Saran & Deo 2018, p. 20). Others have pondered the issue, asking "why India's democracy is dying" (Tudor, 2023).

The World Press Freedom Index 2023, which surveyed 180 countries, placed India at rank 161, at the lower end, alongside countries such as Russia and Turkey.

Armed with a sharp-edged doctrine of Hindu nationalism, Mr. Modi has presided over the nation's broadest assault on democracy, civil society and minority rights in at least 40 years. He has delivered prosperity and national pride to some, and authoritarianism and repression of many others that should disturb us all (Jasanoff, 2023).

The World Press Freedom Index 2023, which surveyed 180 countries, placed India at rank 161, at the lower end, alongside countries such as Russia and Turkey. The situation of the Indian press has gone from "problematic" to "very bad" (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Freedom House, which measures trends in democracy and authoritarianism in its annual survey, lists India in the group of countries with the largest ten-year decline of freedom. As a result, India has been downgraded from "free" to "partly free" (Freedom House, 2023).

The government in Delhi censored the press and shut down the Internet and telephone for weeks. Thousands of opposition politicians and journalists ended up imprisoned, many to this day.

In 2019, for example, India passed two laws to marginalise citizens in an effort to consolidate Modi's Hindu nationalist India. The government revoked the special constitutional status of the federal states of Jammu and Kashmir, bringing them under the administration of Delhi. The majority population there is Muslim and has been fighting for independence for decades. The military has brutally cracked down on protesters, whom Delhi sees as terrorists. The government in Delhi censored the press and shut down the Internet and telephone for weeks. Thousands of opposition politicians and journalists ended up imprisoned, many to this day.

A new Citizenship Act followed in December 2019. Under this law, all non-Muslim immigrants who arrived from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan before 2014 are granted asylum in India. But the law only applies to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and Christians, so Muslims are automatically and openly deprived of their citizenship. Roy (2020) refers to this law as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh "RSS version of the Nuremberg Laws of 1935," which required the submission of "ancestry papers." The RSS is the militant arm of Modi's BJP.

The concept of *Hindutva*, a nationalist ideology written in 1923 and adhered to by the BJP, proposed the creation of an Indian nation based on its heritage and identity that is strong enough to defend its independence (*swaraj*) in international competition (Wolf & Schultens, 2009). This ideology is the antithesis of Gandhi's and Nehru's idealist version of a secular and multi-cultural India. ●

India and China are embroiled in various irritating conflicts that may well lead to a serious collision between the two powers, even though neither government has any intention of going to war. But conflicts, such as the border disputes, remain unresolved, and new tensions such as competition in the Indian Ocean and the global role have intensified in recent years. What is the state of Indo–Chinese relations today?

Conclusion

1 The territorial conflict in the Himalayas has already led to several military clashes, but the conflict is still unresolved. There are lines of communication, albeit not on a stable basis, to prevent a new war. The zeal with which both sides insist on the inviolability of the border is probably also related to the fact that post-colonial countries have a particularly intense relationship with their territories and boundaries (Bajpai, 2021, p. 63). At present, Beijing and New Delhi are not pursuing active channels of dialogue on other key confrontations—China’s support for Pakistan, China’s activities in the Indian Ocean and India’s global aspirations.

2 The military build-up. China’s growing military power is a major challenge for India. Both countries have a geostrategic agenda in Asia and aspirations for influence in global politics. If hardliners on both sides, who see each other as rivals, get their way, this could lead to an even more intense maritime arms race and tougher military showdowns. Some policy advisors in India have since long argued that the country needs to strengthen its armed forces and build up “competitive coercive capabilities” (Singh, Z., 2011, p. 58). China is in a global competition with the United States and is investing heavily in its military. China outperforms India in terms of hard power. The military build-ups in China and India consume massive

amounts of scarce resources. Usually, states are rational actors pursuing their own interests. These interests include cost-benefit calculations, which should slow down military spending. However, geopolitical reasoning and zero-sum arguments are well-known in China and in India.

Some experts predict a doomsday scenario because China's and India's global visions are at odds: "India and China are now structurally set to collide" (Saran & Deo 2018, p. 19), although the two countries are momentarily certainly not at a point of no return.

3 Perceptions of each other have experienced ups and downs. At the time of writing, negative perceptions and mistrust, and in some cases envy and resentment, probably dominate the relationship. China has a dual strategy towards India's global policy aspirations. In some areas, the two countries work together constructively. In other forums, China views India as a competitor and rival. But for the current Chinese government, Sino-US relations are more important than Indo-China relations. China's view of India is hardly that of a great power, but rather that it plays a secondary role. Modi's foreign policy vis-à-vis China is a balancing act. His government is part of the effort to counter China's claims to power. This makes New Delhi a welcome partner for the West. At the same time, however, it does not simply want to become part of a Western anti-China alliance. If India emphasises its concept of 'multiple alliances' or 'alliances with limited liability', the divergent ideological, political, security, and economic positions between China and the West could offer opportunities for India to improve its relations with China. But both governments are pursuing nationalistic policies—primarily for domestic reasons—that occasionally collide with their ambitions to play a global role and contribute to global well-being.

The governments (and large sections of the population) in both countries are proud of their millennia-old heritage. The question is whether two competing models of society are

emerging in Asia: democratic India and authoritarian China. The West emphasises this contrast, but the otherness of the political concepts need not be a cause for collision.

Both governments display a certain hubris that often prevents friendlier relations. With more humility, less arrogance, and toned-down nationalistic attitudes, some conflicts can be resolved, while others have faded into the background. Both sides seem to be emphasising their disagreements rather than their common interests.

4 Potential partnership. China is economically much more expansionist and bullying than India. In the West, India is seen mainly as a potential strategic partner, given its democratic and cultural heritage, while authoritarian China is seen as a dangerous systemic rival. By relying more on its soft power, India will further improve its global position. Nye (2004, p. X) defines soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment.” In this context, soft power can be understood as the ability of a government to co-opt other states without using hard power (such as military means or trade sanctions). India’s culture, its democracy and political pluralism, its free press, religious diversity, its values and cultural heritage make it an attractive partner, even though some of these values are not only at risk but have already been systematically eroded by the current government’s Hindu-nationalistic domestic policies.

5 Ways to de-escalate. How can Indo–Chinese tensions be reduced and hostile behaviour de-escalated? A more cordial relationship could be facilitated by reducing competition, strengthening conflict management, increasing co-operation in unproblematic areas and establishing regular dialogue and routine consultations. India’s prime minister declared at a security conference in Singapore in 2018: “I firmly believe that Asia and the world will have a better future when India and China work together in trust and confidence, sensitive to each

other's interests" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). Together, China and India could change the global balance of power, with positive effects on economic development and security in Asia and beyond. But mistrust has exacerbated their mutual dislike. In the early years when Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi came to power in 2013 and 2014 respectively, the two leaders held in-depth exchanges on bilateral relations with the intention of stabilising them. In recent years, however, bilateral exchanges have stalled. This could also be due to the fact that both heads of government have an unmistakable penchant for self-promotion. In Beijing and Delhi, the cult of personality is highly visible.

To avoid further tensions the two governments should co-operate more closely by putting aside their differences and emphasising their common interests. One example could be the territorial disputes. Despite many rounds of border talks, no final agreement has been reached. India seems to insist on an agreement (on its own terms), while China prefers to avoid or de-link contentious issues to co-operate on areas of bilateral interest. China has on several occasions offered a swap of disputed territories whereby it would give up claims in the east and India would give up claims in the west. These proposals never materialised, mainly because India was not interested, and China eventually backed down. But that doesn't mean such a deal is impossible.

If the protracted border conflict remains unresolved and a final political settlement is not in sight, both governments should seek to de-escalate by promoting regular communication between military leaders in the region. The unfriendly neighbours should refrain from building up their forces and their military infrastructure in the region. At the time of writing, both India and China are doing the opposite.

This is also reflected in the two countries' increased maritime engagement in the Indian Ocean. These activities increase the risk of a conflict. Both governments would be well advised to conclude a Sino-Indian Incidents at Sea Agreement, similar to the one that the United States and the Soviet Union had

concluded during the Cold War. Such an agreement could help prevent routine “naval encounters from spiralling out of control” (Rehman, 2010, p. 13). If implemented, it could have a de-escalating effect, but it would not remove mutual suspicions about their strategic intentions (Singh, 2019, p. 13). “Without a realistic political solution in sight, China and India should make crisis management and de-escalation along the border their priorities” (International Crisis Group, 2023, p. 30).

6 **More cooperation or de-coupling?** The potential for cooperation between the two Asian countries is currently under-exploited. There is much scope for intensified political and economic cooperation, which would not only strengthen the Sino–Indian relations but could also have a positive impact on multipolar global settings. But after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine the notion, popular in the *détente* period, that trade relations would promote good neighbourly relations is no longer valid. On the contrary: India’s trade deficit with China sets alarm bells ringing in New Delhi. India has therefore introduced a policy of de-risking and de-coupling from China. But economic disengagement is not easy because India is still dependent on imports from China. If China and India can transform their competitive, fragile and unstable relationship into something more cooperative, it could have a huge positive impact on both countries—and on global politics.

Both governments see their countries as Asian powerhouses with global ambitions. Their tit-for-tat behaviour is souring their relationship. India and China are engaged in strategic competition, especially in Asia’s hot spots and beyond. The Indian government is interested in defining its political role to match its economic clout. But it is also interested in setting aside ideological frictions and working with like-minded countries to develop a roadmap for a new multilateralism. There has been no progress in their relationship in recent years—on the contrary, it is deteriorating. But perhaps, they could rejuvenate the erstwhile concept of *Panchsheel*, possibly even the Hindi–Chini brotherhood. ●

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BIMSTEC	Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation
BJP	Bharat Janata Party
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CPEC	China–Pakistan Economic Corridor
EU	European Union
G20	Group of 20 (of the largest economies)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LAC	Line of Actual Control
ORCA	Organisation for Research on China and Asia
P5	Permanent Members of the UN Security Council
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
PRC	People’s Republic of China
Quad	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (Indian right-wing paramilitary organisation)
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
USD	US Dollar
WTO	World Trade Organization

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Annex

Roller-coaster Relations

Colonial legacy

- 1914 Tibet–British India Simla Convention (McMahon Line): The border between China and India follows the Himalayan mountain range not recognised by China
- 1947 End of British colonial rule in India. Legacy: unclear demarcation of borders in the Himalayas
Partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan (East and West Pakistan)

Friendly relations

- 1950 Establishment of diplomatic relations
Chinese occupation of Tibet
- 1952 India recognises China's sovereignty over Tibet
- 1954 Hindi–Chini bhai bhai (*Panchsheel*): Agreement on Peaceful Coexistence
- 1958 Border clashes Publication of maps with different territorial claims
- 1959 Tibetan revolt against China's occupation; suppression by military means; Dalai Lama and thousands of refugees flee to India
Two conflicts between Indian and Chinese troops over border violations
China's proposal for a Line of Actual Control (LAC) as status quo of the border not accepted by India
- 1960 Chinese proposal for a demilitarised zone and exchange of territory: India should renounce the region of Aksai Chin in the western sector; China makes no claims to Arunachal Pradesh in the east; rejection by India

Wars and conflicts

- 1961 Military fortifications at the border
- 1962 Border war with heavy casualties (7,000 Indian soldiers: dead, missing, in captivity); territorial losses of India

- 1965 India–Pakistan war over Kashmir
- 1967 Border clashes
- 1971 India–Pakistan war; independence of Bangladesh, previously East Pakistan
- 1972 China–Pakistan Strategic Partnership; China’s military aid to Pakistan
- 1973 Indian troops invade Sikkim; Sikkim has been an Indian federal state since 1975
- 1975 Border clashes

Thaw

- 1980s Political rapprochement: emphasis on common interests; renewed Chinese proposal for a territorial exchange; renewed rejection by India
- 1986 Border clashes
- 1987 Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s visit to China
- 1988 Agreement to de-couple border conflicts from other relations; the LAC remains controversial
- 1992 Agreement on Peace and Tranquility at the border and respect for the status quo
- 1996 Treaty on “common and equal security” with restriction on the deployment of heavy weapons
- 1999 Border clashes; Kargil war between Pakistan and India over Kashmir
- 2000 Exchange of incompatible maps of the border
- 2005 Renewed agreement to clarify the demarcation of the border

Hardened positions

- 2005 China’s hardened position on the border; regular military skirmishes
Security cooperation between India and the United States
- 2007 Stricter military border controls; China refers to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh as “South Tibet”

Great Power competition

- 2013 Invasion of Chinese troops into Ladakh; military confrontation followed by a new border agreement
China’s Belt and Road (New Silk Road) project without Indian participation; signing of an agreement on the Sino–Pakistan Economic Corridor
- 2014 Military confrontation

- 2015 Joint US–Indian Strategic Vision for Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean; Expansion of military infrastructure on both sides of the Indo–China border
- 2017 High tensions and military confrontation; de-escalation after face-to-face exchanges between Xi and Modi; reviving the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) between Australia, India, Japan and the United States
- 2019 Frozen Indo–Chinese dialogue: Heads of governments only meet at multilateral summits
- 2020 Fierce fighting with casualties on both sides; troop concentration along the border: 100,000 Indian and Chinese soldiers in the remote Himalayan region

Source: author’s compilation



The Author

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