

Classifying China-India Relationships: Cooperation, Competition and Conflict

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Date Received: 23 September 2022 Date Accepted: 20 October 2022 Date Published: 30 November 2022

ABSTRACT

As major neighbors, Sino-Indian relations affects both countries' development and security interests and impacts stability and development on a global and regional scale. This relationship is the product of bilateral strategic perceptions and policy choices coupled by active engagement and interaction. This study scrutinizes the classification of China-India relationship types and the various factors affecting them from multiple perspectives through a literature review to ascertain the characteristics and nature of strategic interactions between Sino-Indian relations at the global, regional and bilateral levels. China-India relationships can be divided into three types, namely cooperation, competition and conflict, which determine the development trend of long-term relations. At the global level, China and India share common development demands and a common desire to restore their status as great powers, leading them to have consistent strategic interests and common positions on specific global affairs. At the regional level, the strategic spaces of the two countries overlap in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, and strategic competition is prone to occur. At the bilateral level, mainly border conflicts and trade imbalances make it difficult to deepen bilateral cooperation. The strategic foundation of the China-India cooperative relationship at the global, regional, and bilateral dimensions is also weakening, with trends showing leaning toward competition and conflict escalation.

Keywords: China-India relationships; relationship types; competition; cooperation; conflict

INTER-STATE RELATIONSHIP TYPES

Generally, inter-state relationship types between great powers can be specifically divided into three categories: allies, non-enemies and non-friends, and adversaries (Yan & Yang, 2013). Few uniform standards exist on defining the relationship between two countries. Nonetheless, extant studies outline three broad categories towards inter-state relationship.

The first category posits that political relations, security relations, economic relations and cultural relations form the backbone of bilateral relations, which are then composed of further

types of relations or their derivatives thereof (Wang, 2018). The second believes that state actors are equivalent to sub-state actors in a polycentric world. Countries therefore compete, cooperate, interact, or coexist with each other, constantly challenging and weakening the dominant role of traditional state actors and pushing the face of world politics to change (James, 2003; Yin, 2009). The third category argues that although there are many different kinds of inter-state relations, ranging from military to water resources development, these can be classified into one of four types: conflict, competition, coordination and cooperation (Ye, 2018). Following these different views on defining inter-state relations this study classifies China-India relationships types from the above mentioned types.

CLASSIFICATION OF CHINA-INDIA RELATIONSHIP TYPES

China-India relations is arguably the most important bilateral relationship around the Indian Ocean, and is characterized by growing differences and common interests. The dominant paradigm of previous studies on Sino-Indian relations generally lacks a macro-strategic perspective by heavily focusing on competition and cooperation within said relationship (Ye, 2018). Some scholars have also defined China-India relationships as confrontational and conciliatory in four dimensions: political, economic, cultural, and military (Sushanta, 2014). The relationship is also alternatively discussed in three dimensions: economic, military and systemic (Chris, 2022). These are common ways of scholarly classifying China-India relations. However, numerous scholars have suggested that China-India relations are also characterized by territorial and border conflicts. This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic where a fierce conflict broke out in the China-India border which escalated into a level of conflict unseen in decades (Li et al., 2020). This territorial dispute became a prominent competitive element (and strain) in modern Sino-Indian relationships. Hence, China-India relationship types can broadly classified into three categories: cooperation, competition, and conflict.

CHINA-INDIA COOPERATION RELATIONSHIP

China and India are both ancient civilizations. As developing countries, both China and India are part of the larger international system, contend with the current framing of international rules, maintain regional peace and stability, and promote regional cooperation. There is room for cooperation between China and India in areas such as disease prevention and control, anti-terrorism, and cultural exchanges. However, most of these are not part of India's high priority issues and sectors. Their propensity to enhance bilateral relations is also usually confined to short-term goals and partnerships (Zhang et al., 2022).

Given both countries' increasing interdependence and involvement in the regional integration process, mutual benefit has become an important ballast to the development of their relationship— ushering more avenues for consensus and cooperation replacing those of disagreement and competition. Maintaining high-level state visits is conducive to Sino-Indian cooperation in various areas. At the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, China, India, South Africa) Summit in Xiamen last September of 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and emphasized that both sides should mutually seize opportunities for development and pose no threat to each other, stating that China and India should not “fight” but should “dance with the dragon and the elephant”. In April of 2018, a state level dialogue between both countries in Wuhan marked the second time that Xi Jinping met a foreign leader outside of Beijing on an unofficial visit to another Chinese city. Notably, the first time he met with a visiting foreign leader outside of Beijing was also Modi.

Moreover, the first meeting of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic

Corridor Joint Working Group was held in Kunming, China in May 2013. During his visit to India, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang proposed an initiative to build the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which received positive responses from the Indian, Bangladeshi, and Burmese governments. China and India subsequently signed an agreement to build said economic corridor. In December 2014, the second meeting of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor's Joint Working Group was held in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The meeting discussed and looked into the prospects, priorities and development directions of the economic corridor. The BCIM Economic Corridor will not only directly benefit the four countries, but also contribute to the joint development of the three economic sectors of South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia.

China and India share a strategic framework and engage in mutual communication for peacekeeping, while remaining focused on other more important relationships and concerns such as the effects of US foreign policies and their own economic development (Menon, 2017). In October 2014, India signed a contract in Beijing as the first intending founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and contributed more than \$8 billion to become the second largest shareholder in the AIIB, with a stake of about 8%, second only to China's 30% .

CHINA-INDIA COMPETITION RELATIONSHIP

Recently, status competition has seemed to dominate the landscape of larger Sino-Indian relations, with India unwilling to accept China's status as a major power second only to the United States and China hard-pressed to recognize India as another emerging power with nuclear capabilities (Chao, 2019). With its growing economic power, India has come to consciously view China as a competitor in the global market (Cao & Feng, 2022).

Unlike previous emphasis on cooperative relationships, various scholars have increasingly argued that Sino-Indian relations is occupied by competitive elements (Delwar & Md, 2021). Khan suggests that the "Wuhan spirit" and the "Chennai Consensus", which outline both India and China's maintenance of friendly exchanges at the highest level, should be implemented. However, the relationship seems to be *de facto* shifting towards competition, conflict, and unstable traditional differences (Khan, 2021). Lou also argues that there has been a major shift in India's foreign policy towards China due to the influence of the changes of domestic political ecology, the adjustment of foreign strategic policy, and the intensifying strain between China and the United States. Lou believes that China-India relationship, from one of "competition and stability" has turned into one of "competition and cooperation" (Lou, 2020).

In February 2015, India raised the import duty on mobile phones from 6% to 12.5%, forcing Chinese mobile phone companies such as Huawei, Xiaomi, and Coolpad to expand production in India. India also regularly conducts and has one of the highest numbers of anti-dumping investigations against Chinese products. In February 2021, India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has issued another ban on 54 mobile phone application, most of them from Chinese companies, due to "security threats".

The biggest external reason for India's competitive treatment towards China stems from the US: India is not cooperating with China to make its economic pie bigger, and is instead competing with US to become a maritime power (Li et al., 2020). The US influence on India-China relations is the result of a combination of US national policies and foreign policy directions towards the South Asian subcontinent, India's "non-aligned" foreign policy, and the unbridgeable contradictions between India and China (Wang, 2018). To counterbalance Chinese influence and strengthen cooperation with India in the Indian Ocean on matters such as regional cooperation and military defense, the US has been recently enhancing US-India relations (Yang, 2015).

The US is arguably the biggest reason for the growing uncertainty regarding Sino-Indian relations (Lin, 2019). The Biden administration released its "U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy," which emphasized its further devotion in greater diplomatic and security resources in the "Indo-Pacific region" to counter what it sees as China's "attempts to establish a sphere of influence in the region" and become "the most influential country in the world". Core foreign policy directives include supporting India's continued rise and quest for regional leadership, launching the so-called "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework," and ensuring its commitment to the Quadripartite Security Dialogue, which is an informal strategic dialogue among the United States, Japan, India and Australia that relies on dialogue among member states to contain China's rise.

CHINA-INDIA CONFLICT RELATIONSHIP

Despite the crests and troughs in modern Sino-Indian relations, political exchange, economic and trade investments, border issues, and the prevention and control of the new COVID-19 pandemic remain salient cross-country issues of bilateral engagement, with border conflicts accounting for the highest proportion and being the most significant type of conflict that has erupted between both countries (Yang, 2015; Kaula, 2020; Zhang, 2016). These long-standing territorial disputes have led to low mutual trust (Chris Ogden, 2022). However, neither country assuredly wants any face-to-face conflict at this stage.

Given the territorial disputes, previous issues of cooperation have disappeared or have taken the backseat. Both countries have agreed to maintain dialogue through military and diplomatic channels to reach a mutually acceptable solution to the remaining issues as soon as possible. However, watershed moments for the thawing of relations are yet to be achieved. This has eventually led to both sides having weaker common interests: although there is competition for regional influence, China's influence is more limited in South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The "Donglang incident" which erupted in 2017, as well as skirmishes in the Galwan Valley and the standoff on the southern shore of the Bangong Lake in 2020, have led India to send strong signals about the "Belt and Road" and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Ye, 2020). The scope of the collision of interests between China and India has been expanding with increasing areas of mutual competition and further limiting of the conflict (Lou, 2020).

Since 2021, India and China have held several rounds of military chief level discussions and consultations regarding the ongoing border dispute. Although bilateral tensions have eased, both sides remain to reach a definite mutual agreement on the issue. As it continues to affect bilateral relations, security issues have gradually become the main conflict between India and China. The China-India border dispute has also "spilled over" into other areas, such as India's recalibration of its political and economic policies towards China. The negative impact of China-India relationships is eroding the political mutual trust and overall cooperation between China and India (Zhang et al., 2022). This led to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly stating at the second Raisina Dialogue that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can only achieve its goals and avoid disagreements and strife if it respects the sovereignty of the countries concerned and regional connectivity, marking a major turn in India's approach towards the BRI.

A creative strategy should be decided on reducing the conflict between China and India, which ultimately requires diplomatic wisdom. China and India can collaborate to build a new system replacing the existing one dominated by hegemony (Larsen, 2017). In more favorable circumstances, emerging powers can work together to create new regimes that reflect their common concerns and interests (Nitin & Sita, 2020; Xie, 2019). Economic relations can also be improved by introducing better public services and responsive policy making. China and India therefore need to strengthen bilateral dialogue and regional cooperation to avoid escalating strategic competition into unnecessary geopolitical conflict.

INTERPRETING CHINA-INDIA RELATIONSHIPS FROM THE GLOBAL, REGIONAL AND BILATERAL DIMENSIONS

Recent China-India relations have become more competitive, more challenging, and more complex, marked by cross-cutting and overlapping issues at the global, regional, and bilateral levels, and ultimately presenting a complex situation where old issues remain unresolved despite the emergence of new ones. This pattern of interaction can be summarized as one of "global cooperation, regional competition, and bilateral control".

TABLE 1. India-China Relationship Types

Dimensions	Competition	Cooperation	Conflict
Global dimension	Two countries simultaneously rising (and competing for international status); Difference in positions in the international system structure	Common aspirations in international affairs, national conditions of developing countries; Pandemic prevention and control; Combating terrorism; Consensus on major international issues; Liberalization and anti-protectionism in international and regional trade; Climate change; Defense of national sovereignty norms; Reformation of international institutions; Common desire to research major power status; Desire to build a new international order; Establishing representation on the interests of developing countries; Global financial operations; The "Asian Investment Bank"; The New Development Bank	Pakistan
Regional dimension	Competing influences in South Asia and the Indian Ocean (China's westward expansion into the Indian Ocean versus India's eastward strategic competition towards the Western Pacific); Overlapping peripheral regions; Preservation of regional hegemony; Maritime security and Rules of interconnectedness; The Indo-Pacific order; China-Pakistan relations;	China-India+1/ X Trilateral and Multilateral Infrastructure Development; Maritime Cooperation; Combating Piracy; BRICS; Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor; Shanghai Cooperation Organisation;	Pakistan
Bilateral dimension	Trade imbalance; Difference in development strategies; Compound competition in interaction with the US;	Counter-terrorism and non-traditional security issues; Mutually beneficial trade and investment; Security strategy differences	Border and Territorial Disputes; The Tibet issue

Source: Compiled by the author from relevant sources

Globally, China and India share a similar development experience, the same national conditions, a common aspiration towards development, as well as a shared desire to restore their status as previously great powers. They both have largely aligned strategic interests, which have resulted to developing common positions on various specific issues. As the largest and fastest rising Asian power in contemporary global politics, the relationship between India and China is becoming increasingly intertwined. Clear commonalities represent this symbiotic relationship: a common civilization base, a shared desire to re-emerge as a major power, and common development goals (Chris, 2022). In the long term, these will require a partnership between India and China based on shared defense and politico-economic objectives.

At the regional dimension, strategic spatial overlap is mainly concentrated in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region which is the “intersection of China's and India's interests” stemming from the “dual rise” and its susceptibility to strategic competition (Zhang & Sun , 2019). This is shown by India’s increasing insecurity as a result of China's growing relationship with Pakistan, its economic penetration in South Asia, and its expanded military presence in the Indian Ocean (Brandon & Kanti, 2022). Conversely, China fears that India's growing ties with the United States and its Indo-Pacific allies, as well as greater US-Indian cooperation in multilateral forums, could constitute a powerful balancing alliance against its foreign interests (Brandon & Kant, 2022).

Bilaterally, issues such as border and territorial disputes, the Tibetan issue, trade imbalances, the difference in development strategies, and the competitive relationship between China India and the United States interacting in a composite competition have transpired as cornerstone issues, making it difficult to reach bilateral cooperative relations. With border conflicts gradually becoming main tension points for mutual distrust, both sides should focus on mutual border management and actively maintaining the status quo of peace (Cao & Feng, 2022). In the near future, India may make various moves in the border area, while also maintaining communication with China through military and diplomatic channels (Zhang et al., 2022). Currently however, neither China nor India is likely to make any substantial concessions or compromises on the territorial issue precisely because of the difficulty in resolving territorial conflicts in the short term, which would entail managing and setting aside their differences.

CONCLUSION

There exist various points of both convergence and divergence in China-India relations, with the main points of conflict being the China-India border conflict. While conflict and competition exist in some areas, cooperation and coordination between China and India continue in others. From a long historical perspective, Sino-Indian relations have manifested itself as a symbiotic relationship of differences and consensus, competition and cooperation, and the convergence and conflict of interests, which determine the overall development trend of these relations. Enhancing mutual understanding and strategic mutual trust will play an important and constructive role in promoting this precarious relationship.

Additionally, China-India relations are plagued by the China-India border conflict, which has led to a screeching halt in the momentum. Hence, the strategic basis of China-India cooperative relations is weakening at the global, regional, and bilateral levels— with the trend towards competition and conflict continuously intensifying.

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