

# Evaluating Dynamics of Sino-India Relations: Cooperation, Competition and Conflict

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## Abstract

*Recent border skirmishes between China and India are the new episode in the competitive relationship between the two. Competitive relationship comes out of divergences between the on various fronts especially their rise in power potentials and desire to become regional hegemons. Though Sino-Indian relationship has been cooperative-competitive since the first India-China border war in 1962, today it is considered as the most complex, competitive, and conflict-prone. Their border issues, trade competition and political influence in the South Asia and Indian Ocean region are the crucial factors in the cooperative-competitive relationship. Chinese massive naval build-up and assertiveness in the south and East China Sea and India's strategic partnerships with the extra-regional powers have made the relationship more complicated. This paper tries to dissect the complex nature and dynamics of the competitive-cooperative Sino-India relationship. It explains the pattern of China-India bilateral relations with specific focus on competition, conflict, and cooperation. Effort has also been made to evaluate the impact of the conflict or cooperation cycles on their nature and development of bilateral ties.*

**Keywords:** Sino-Indian Relationship; Indian Ocean Region; Competition; Border Conflicts.

## 1. Introduction

China and India are two rising powers of the world. In term of critical mass and economy both are heavyweights of the region with significant influence in the regional geo-economics and politics. Relations between China and India are significant for the regional peace, stability, and development. The relationship revolves around the three dynamic dimensions; conflict; competition and cooperation. Evaluating the nature and the dynamics, it can be espoused here that both the states have been engaged in a competitive-cooperative relationship since 1960s. Where both states have engaged in variety of cooperative ventures and actively pursue socio-economic and trade relations, both compete for certain political share in the region and indulged in episodes of conflict from the 1962 border war to the recent border skirmishes.

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Recent dynamics suggests, India and China have engaged in cycle of cooperative-competitive trajectory. Where, they cooperate on matters of low-politics like human security, health security, climate change and trade and investment, they have engaged in competition and even conflict on the issues of high-politics like territorial issues and the issues of sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean. They compete for the relative trade advantage and for the sphere of influence. Extra-regional powers' relations like that of US strategic and defense with India, and India's participation in so called anti-china platforms like Quad relations have further complicated the nature of the relationship between the two. The interesting fact remains that though India maneuvers to compete China in various areas; technology, Trade, and investment, remained suspicious of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and even engaged in various violent conflicts, the trade between the two countries have reached to \$100 billion.

This paper tries to dissect the complex nature and dynamics of the competitive-cooperative Sino-India relationship. It explains the pattern of China-India bilateral relations with specific focus on competition, conflict, and cooperation.

## **2. Literature Review**

Literature on the subject matter guides about the nature, dynamics, and complexes of Sino-Indian relationship, (Jikang & Mingjiang, 2020) articulates that although, there are many avenues for India and China to cooperate in global politics, but the two states have divergence in their political and security objectives, resides in Asia, which make 'security dilemma' one of the major factors, that shapes the bilateral relations between the two countries, (Korolev & Wu, 2019) provides that both, China, and India are strengthening their bilateral relations without paying attention to any third party, particularly the United States. Neither Chinese leader nor its state's official media do not ever talk about the China-India relations with reference to the third-party infoldment in the bilateral ties, (Jain, 2021) says that India is concerned about the Chinese expansion in the Asia Pacific, which makes Delhi to strengthen her relations with the other big regional power. For this, India tries to dense her relations with Japan and Australia, the two countries work as northern and southern allies of Untied States in the region. (Xie, 2019) possess a different approach, he examines the 'China-India' bilateral relations and is of the view that China is working for her global recognition as great power, while India looks for regional hegemony. China's global ambition is also a threat for the US supremacy. India has strived to have cooperation with extra-regional great powers to balance China (Haiqi, 2021; Haiqi, 2021). For India, the rise of China is major concern, and she is taking the Chinese rise too seriously which instigate a struggle for dominance between the two rising powers, in the Asia-Pacific.

## **3. Nature and Dynamics of Sino-India Relations**

China and India established diplomatic relations in 1949. Initially, the two most populous states were determined to cultivate the relationship based on dignity and respect. Despite of the different political system; democracy in India and communist dictatorship in China, the former vowed its relations as new avenues of bilateral cooperation in the following years (Raghavan, 2019; Raghavan, 2019). They collectively leaned towards a third world in the Cold war and tried to remain non-aligned. Mao Zedong cautioned Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, about the image of China and India in the eyes of United States (US) and focused on the strengthening of their bilateral friendship. During Nehru's visit to Beijing in 1954, he said "The United States does not recognize our two countries [China and India] as great powers" (Radchenka, 2014; Radchenka, 2014).

However, the relations between the two states were deteriorated because of the emergence of border conflict between the two states in 1959, resulted in Sino-Indian War 1962. The deteriorated relations were restored when Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi paid visit to China at the invitation of Chinese Premier Li Peng, in 1988. The visit revived the bilateral ties between the two states that were established earlier purely based on five principles of peaceful coexistence; mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality, and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existing. The visit also enabled the high officials of the two sides to visit the other state to conclude agreements of various domains including economic, trade, strategic and technological. From 1989 to 2014, the two countries enjoyed good relations. However, both, minor and major disruption in bilateral relations between China and India has been erupting since 2014.

With China's rise and India's close relationship with US and its regional allies like Japan and Australia, China-India relations have become more complex. India fears of the exponential growth of Chinese military and economic might and ever-expanding influence in Indian ocean and South Asia particularly its blue navy and its comprehensive partnerships with Pakistan and Sri Lanka. On the other hand, china perceives India's defense and strategic partnership with US as a pact to contain its interests in the region and beyond and a clear threat to its core interests in the South and Southeast Asia. Explaining the nature of bilateral relations between the two states, needs to analyze the population, economic, military, trade, and each state. On (active) military side, China has 218,500 military troops, while India has 1,455,550 military troops (The Military Balance 2021, 2021) (The Military Balance 2021, 2021). China is also a leading the world with the total exports of 2,643,376.93 USD billions (MA, 2021), while India's export worth is 546,033.12 USD billions (Exports of Goods and Services, 2020). Apparently, there is no structural ground that causes disruption in China-India relations at global level, however, there are territorial issues and geopolitical positions that serve as impediments in the cordial relationship between the two.

### 3.1 India's Perspective on the Bilateral Relations

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, India had been taking China as a friendly neighbour and tried strengthening of bilateral relation by initiates including trade deals, military-support agreements, technology sharing and others. However, the disruption occurred due to boarder issues in the last decade, changed the Indian perceptions. Due to Chinese uncompromising behaviour on the border issues and effort to reclaim the disputed territory, India now believes that her relations with China could only be strengthened and developed when the border issues are resolved. Her external minister Subrahmanyam Jaishanka stated in a conference, "peace and tranquillity in the border areas is the basis for development of relations in other domains" (Jaishanka, 2021). The Minister's statements clearly direct how much the border issues are significant for India.

But on the other hand, India views China's economic rise as an opportunity to achieve its own socio-economic goals. Poverty-ridden India needs China's capital and market for its own economic growth. The two countries have been in a continuous trade and that is reached to \$100 billion mark and has become one of the high trade volumes in the region China-India bilateral trade is more than of Indian trade with the US. This highest volume of trade with China, made China, the biggest trading partner of India (Times of India, 2021)(Times of India, 2021). However, the trade and economic exchange is one of the main pillars of India-China relations, there has created some trade-dependency on china and trade deficit of India against China is continuously rising. In this background, India has tried to diverse its trade venues and is also making efforts to minimize its economic reliance on China. For this, Indian Prime Minister Narandara Modi announced his Atma-nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan Package, a scheme to deal with challenge of global supply chain issues and launched Supply Chain Reliance Initiative with Japan and Australia to increase the country exports to two countries, which actually reflects Indian Government's preference of exports to other countries rather than China, that would help her to compete China on Global Economic order (Misra, 2020; Suneja, 2021).

### 3.2. China Perspective on the Bilateral Relations

China holds different position on the bilateral relations, to India's especially when it comes to the border issues. India is quite rigid for the boarder concerns, while China has been flexible over the matters of borders because of its preoccupation of domestic issues and regime stability and legitimacy. Until the start of the new millanum, It kept its policy of 'Keeping the Low Profile' and regarded the boarders are just a part of their bilateral relations with neighbours.

Being a next-door neighbour, India holds a significant consideration in formulation of Chinese foreign policy. Most often, China talks about her relations with India by quoting the metaphor 'Dragan and Elephant'. In the relations with India, China believes that enjoying the good relations is only the

right choice for two nations according to Chinese ambassador to India Sun Weidong (Xinhua, 2020). Until recently, Beijing has been careful in referring the border conflicts with India, she preferred to use the word ‘Foreign Troops’ rather than ‘Indian Troops’ (BBC News, 2021), which indicates the Chinese intentions of not harming or conveying any harmful messages by quoting her neighbour’s name.

#### 4. Cooperation

China and India have many similarities, and the two countries have a long history of cultural and friendly exchange. China believes on mutual beneficial and win-win situation in her bilateral relations. This approach always helps China in two dimensions, firstly, it help in establishing the strategic relations with full of trust and commitments. Secondly, in tackling the social difference through the construction of social realities by subjective values, which eventually help in converting the Sino-India relations in healthy friendship (Yonghong, 2021).

The factor of being a part of the emerging economies, helps China and India in strengthen their ties by cooperation in Industrial chain building, infrastructure construction, non-traditional maritime security and people-to-people exchanges. Taking the example of international trade negotiations, the two countries, are the member of BASIC Countries (a bloc of four large newly industrialized countries – Brazil, South Africa, India and China, aims to define emission reduction and climate change and work on), and Like Minded Group of Developing countries (-the group of developing countries for representing the 50% of world’s population in international organizations). The two countries have different positions on climate change. China aims to facilitate the word by her efforts, as Chinese President Xi Jinping said while addressing to United Nations General Assembly’s session last year (in 2060):

*“China is set to provide more COVID-19 vaccines to the world and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060, ... China will strive to peak carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060, ... we need to advocate peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and freedom, which are the common values of humanity, and reject the practice of forming small circles or zero-sum games”* (Affairs, 2021).

The President XI’s words also reflect that China is ready and leading the world, and the country believes on equal gain approach, for peaceful and harmonies world.

China and India also colouring their friendship on the forum of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO is an Eurasian political, economic and security alliance, created to strengthen mutual trust among member state, and to promote cooperation in politics, economy, technology and culture among member state, was created by the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People’s Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Russian Federation, the Republic

of Tajikistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan. Later, India became the member of SCO in 2017. Although the year, 2017, was awkward year for China and India, as they went through several boarder tensions. But, despite of their bilateral conflicts, both states take part enthusiastically in the events organized by SCO, since the inclusion of India. Recently, India took part in SCO military exercises with China (Xinhua, 2021).

Both, China and India, are also member of BRICS – the representation of five major emerging economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Each year, the dignitaries of these emerging economies met for one time to discuss the further goals for combine development. Beside this, these meeting facilitate the leaders meet and discuss their bilateral relations, earlier this year, India chaired and hosted the meeting of BRICS, which was openly supported by China, and expressed the wishes for cooperation despite of the ongoing border issues (Wong, 2021). This is first meeting that enabled the leader of two states share words on the forum after the 9-months border tension.

Like SCO and BRICS, G 20 Summits also provide opportunity to China and India their matters, on its platform, despite of whatever their conflicts are. The two countries, China and India, are part of G20, and it had made the leaders agreed on various issue including improving bilateral relations through trade, accelerating the development by investing in infrastructure, and setting up manufacturing units in India, over the past several years (Sajjanher, 2016).

### **5. Rise of China and India: A Competition of Sphere of Influence**

Indian Ocean region, that is of vital strategic importance because of the fact that it links the energy rich Middle East with the Southern and Easter part of the Asia and is one of the busiest routes lies in it, has made it a centre of strategic competition between China and India. The struggle for expanding the influence in the ocean has intensified the rivalry between the two economic giants particularly over the course of past decade. It has led to increased presence and deployment of Naval forces of both in the Indian Ocean. Today, securing herself from the Indian Ocean side, has become the strategic priority of India, as the country has already been facing threat from Northern and Western side (Roy-Chaudhury, 2018). China has also started the efforts to materialise her vision of securing her sovereignty in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, to have strong strategic position in the region (Mukherjee, 2018). Previously, the competition between India and China was mainly limited to the land only (Sun, 2020). With the increasing effort for the maritime security, it has also been extended to sea also.

Chinese policy makers are well-aware of India's limitations to attack on China due to a small number of physical resources, small naval and military resources compared to China. So, it does not have any need to modernize its military technology to deter India, as it already possesses the enough arsenals to deter the nuclear threat from India. However, Chinese leader believes that India is just developing in terms of quality and quantity its arsenals, just for

international prestige (Dalton & Zhan, 2020). Last year, India started to develop a land pool to attract businesses -intended to shift from China (Bloomberg, 2020). It was wrongly assumed that has added new layer to competition between China and India. However, for India, it is the need of time to focus more on the challenges and difficulties -created by the Modi's government, that has been facing by the business community while investing in India, although much reform have been made on the tax system, but there are lot of other domains that need the leadership's attention, for make the conducive environment for the international business community. However, if the trading competition against China, helps India to combine the various interest groups within the country, despite of the grievances and differences, then it could be called healthy competition (Will China-India Economic Competition Be Benign or a Battle? , 2020).

The regional security order is another domain of competition between the two states: China and India. The region is highly complex and fragile because of the border juncture of three nuclear states; China, India, and Pakistan. It observed the extremely challenged era during the presence of the United States' troops in Afghanistan. However, the security dynamics has changed and became less volatile after the withdrawal of US troops and the establishment of Islamic Emirates in Afghanistan, with reference to extra-regional spectrum, but it became more volatile with reference to regional spectrum. Basically, now, the region has to deal with 2 (China Pakistan) +1 (India) powers, as the two states; China and Pakistan, has been exemplify their friendship as 'Iron-Brother' since the establishment of their diplomatic ties, which were more strengthened by China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Contemporary, India faces security threat from China and Pakistan. To balance the regional security order and deal with treat, India looks for extra-regional support, for which, the US is right and the only choice, because, for US, helping India too, is also a very feasible, economical, and target-effective approach for optimum gain against China. Rationally, the extra-regional support in region created a power gap that initially causing the mistrust between China and India and disrupts the bilateral relations.

Beside the regional security, the two countries are also engaged in technological competition. Here, it is need to clarify again, that the competition China neither perceive India as competitor, nor she is striving for development or excellence in pursuit of India, because there are not enough elements of competition ("In the international realm competition is an attempt to gain advantage, often relative to others believed to pose a challenge or threat, through the self-interested pursuit of contested goods such as power, security, wealth, influence, and status" (Mazarr et al., 2018).

## **6. Territorial Issues and Episodes of Violent Conflict**

The first break in the bilateral relations was occurred in 1959 over the issue of disputed border, which let to full fledge war in 1962. This border disagreement has still been proving as the bone of contention between the two states. The

roots of the conflict between the two states, lies in the demarcation of boundaries done by British colonial ruler in 1914. The conflict between the two states can be categorized among three parts: Eastern side (Arunachal Pradesh), Central side (Doklam) and Western side (Aksai Chin).

The Eastern side comprising the area of Arunachal Pradesh, is highly significant location for both, China, and India. It serves 30% of total India's freshwater need and also 44% of Indian hydropower potential (Lovelley, 2016; Jiang, 2017). While, for China, Arunachal Pradesh, is the birthplace of Tibetan civilization, and she claims that the country has strong affection to the region. Arunachal Pradesh also offers ample strategic advantage to China to attack India and could create complications for India through it. Earlier this year, Chinese Parliament approved its 14th five-year plan which allows the country to establish world biggest hydropower project of 60-gigawatt power capacity on Yarlung Tsangpo River (Reuters Staff, 2021). While India is planning to construct dam on Barahaputra River, in order to tackle with the flood threat from the Chinese side, and to meet the energy requirements (Arora & Ghoshal, 2020). However, the region attracted much attention with the emergence of military standoff in the recent years.

On Western side (Kashmir), the roots of the conflict are to be found in division of sub-continent in 1947. Different parts of the region are being governed by the three nuclear powers: China, India and Pakistan. Various conflicts and wars have been emerged between Pakistan and India, and India and China, over their borders claims in the region. The 3380-Kilometer-long border line known as Line of Actual Control was loosely demarcated, and it was weakly stretch on the Himalayas Mountain. The two countries; China and India had also been wage a war there in 1962. However, the conflict was reemerged again in 2017. As said earlier, the main conflict is because poor demarcation that does not actual define each state's territory over the snow-capped mountain, lake and river. However, both states have been establishing the infrastructure along the borders. In the 2017's Military standoff, China has been accused of developing a road in disputed territory. But the recent tensions (erupted in October 2019) the situation was totally opposite, in a sense, this not China, but India completed the construction of its highway in the disputed territory which fueled the Chinese aggression, resulted in military confrontation.

While on the central side, the Doklam Plateau also known as 'Chicken Neck' is the key point of conflict between India and China, Doklam is basically being claimed by both, China, and Bhutan (having support of India). It is basically a trajectory point which is surrounded Chumbi Valley of Tibet, Bhutan's Ha Valley and Sikkim. Despite of various talks' engagement between China and Bhutan, the matter has not been resolved yet. The attempt to construction of road by China in the disputed area is to be reported the confrontation between India and China on Doklam in 2017. Doklam, is strategically important for both, China, and India. For China, it makes easy to attack India. For India, it connects mainland India to the north-eastern region.

Although China and India expressed the willingness to resolve the borders disagreement peacefully (India, China Want to Solve Border Dispute ‘Peacefully’: Statement, 2020), but nothing has been done in practical. Both states have been trying to establishment infrastructure in Himalayas for transportation of troops and Weapons, however, the Indian developmental pace is relatively slow than China (Pasricha, 2021), which reflects China’s confidence and assertive approach in her stance, and passiveness over the territory -she claims. While India conveyed strong protests several times by declaring China’s occupation as illegal, as Arindam Bagchi, Spokesperson of Indian Minister of External Affairs said,

*“China has undertaken construction activities in the past several years along the border areas, including in the areas that it has illegally occupied over decades. India has neither accepted such illegal occupation of our territory nor has it accepted the unjustified Chinese claims”* (Ghosh, 2021).

However, the issue has not been resolved due to lack of India and China’s mutual consent on borders demarcations.

### **7. Impact of Conflict and Competition on Sino-India Relations**

The bilateral relations between China and India have been much influencing by conflict as well as cooperation. The Sino-India war of 1962 is the evident of it, as the conflict minor conflict changed the cordial ties between the two states changed the whole course of action, and became an enemy, that ended the diplomatic relations between the two states. The history of China-India bilateral relations also suggests that how smoothly the broken relations were restored with the Indian prime minister’s visit to Beijing. Then, the two countries’ relations again entered to new phase of cooperation

Historical pattern is of the bilateral relations of the two states suggest that it is the main reason of conflict between the two states either the misperception of other states interconnected the objective mode, or the involvement of external elements -that could be involvement of external power (US) or existing fear of aggression. For both, China and India, the goals (hegemony/ power status on international level, preserving the water resources, strengthen own position through economic partnerships), from the lens of international level.

As far as, the direct implication of conflict and cooperation is concerned, it is something natural in realm of in international relations, that conflict and cooperation is directly linking to the bilateral relations. This is basically two side of same equation, which works in directly proportion. However, due to the complex nature of bilateral relations, the relations do influence by conflict and cooperation, but their engagement in international forum like, SCO, G20, BRICS could not allow them to end it completely, and the two states keep working continuously in cooperation for the big goal, that minimize the direct influence on cooperation.

## 8. Conclusion

The equation of China and India relations is very complex, which has been complicated over the years. On the one end, the two countries enjoy good relations, while on the other, they act like rivals. China has been using her superior power status in making the decision that helps her in the emergence on global level. India is a small power relative to China, who aspires to be a power in the world. However, it is relatively tough for her to get materialize her dream because of certain resource limitation. So far, China has been resolved its border issues with 12 states. The two borders; China-India and China-Bhutan are the two only that are not managed peacefully. This issue has been threat to the regional security. However, the regional and extra-regional supports to any party (India or Bhutan) exaggerate the Chinese anger that results in military confrontation.

The two countries have also witnessed ups and downs in their bilateral relations; they are confronting and cooperating at a same time. While, it has been proved that avenues for cooperation are relatively much higher than the cause of conflicts. It has become an evident fact that border issues and the game of influence in the Indian Ocean have restrained the smooth and amicable relationship between the two. Recent competition between China and India is primarily coincided with the rise of the economic might of the two and its related issues related to trade, investment, and energy sectors. The dependence of the two on the sea-borne trade have led them to secure the trade routes through the modernization of the blue-water navy that has created mistrust and on the one hand, forced India to align with the extra-regional powers like US, Japan and Australia and on the other hand, led Chinese massive deployment in the Indian Ocean and surroundings to tackle the situation came out of anti-Chinese influence.

It has also intensified the rigidity of the claims on the border issues and had led the two to fortify the borders through military presence and infrastructure development. Recent border issues and skirmishes are contributing to the already tensed and competitive relationship between the two. The territorial, border and maritime competition and the perceptions of India like its view of the Chinese BRI imitative as an encirclement and Chinese view of India's partnership in Quad and defence and strategic partnership with US as a security threat to its core interests and security, have led the relationship between the two to new low. If the situation persists, there is a eminent chance of a general war between the two that would have grave effects on the economic and security aspects and will deteriorate the regional peace and stability. This complex situation of competitive and conflictual relationship can only be mitigated through their talks through the framework of regional and international organizations and promoting restraint and bilateral dialogue.

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