



## India's Balancing Act between the US and China: Implications for Indian Foreign Policy

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**Abstract:** India attained its independence in 1947, at the height of the Cold War. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, pursued nonalignment while fostering positive ties with the Soviet Union. "Strategic Sovereignty" developed due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which forced India to rebuild and maintain cordial relations with both the Western Bloc and China. India has since maintained a balanced stance with the US-led Western bloc, which includes Europe, Russia, and China. However, China is a crucial issue because it and India are the two rising global and Asian superpowers. However, China and India are on opposite sides of the river bank regarding matters involving border disputes and the Indian Ocean region. India has been driven toward the West due to shifting global dynamics, China's rise to prominence, Russia's dependence on China, and its proximity to and dependence on China. India, on the other hand, won't lose interest in Russia either. Particularly given that Russia is a trusted strategic ally of India and that approximately 70% of the equipment used by our armed forces is of Russian origin.

**Keywords:** India, balancing, foreign policy, US, China, sovereignty, global dynamics, armed forces.

### Introduction

In 1947, the cold war had already begun when India became a sovereign state. As a result, this made it possible for China and NAM to form Panchsheel. The goals of NAM were to promote self-determination and independence, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and non-interference in one another's domestic affairs. But the Sino-Indian War of 1962 caught India off guard and unprepared. After it, India's policies changed. Due to the proximity of China and Pakistan to the USA at the time, India and the USSR agreed to a peace, friendship, and cooperation treaty in 1971. In the 1960s, when relations between Moscow and Beijing were also deteriorating. Moscow was New Delhi's closest ally during the Sovietization of Afghanistan in 1979, and India also backed the United States in every way, including on the economic and political fronts. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, India was forced to direct its foreign policy toward East Asia, China, and the USA. India and Russia kept in touch, although at a lower level. The 2021 edition of Russia's National Security Strategy noted that India has maintained its unique status as a privileged partner with Russia and that Moscow will continue to prioritize its strategic engagement with New Delhi. Similar to India, there is an understanding that despite disagreements on geopolitical issues, New Delhi and Moscow will maintain their close relationship without making any decisions. India is unlikely to create a formal alliance given its strategic relationship with Russia and its doctrine of strategic autonomy. While cautious of Beijing, New Delhi is expected to keep its tight ties with the foremost global power centres by cooperating with the US and Russia. The United States was drawn to India in the 2000s as China emerged as a potential global force. The two nations signed a defence framework agreement in 2005 due to their growing proximity. The 10-year defence agreement deepened the bond between the two countries by expanding opportunities for technology transfer, weapon production, and missile defence

cooperation. India has thus been recognized as a nuclear weapons state de facto and described as “a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology.”

As a result of their evolving perspectives on one another, their relationships underwent a significant improvement, breaking down past obstacles. In addition, Washington considered New Delhi a potential check on China’s strategic resurgence. High-level talks between the two nations were stepped up, including US presidents visiting India. Only three US presidents visited India while in office between 1947 and 1999. Four US presidents visited India five times in office between 1999 and 2020. President Donald Trump’s visit to India in February 2020, during which it was declared that the two countries now have a “Global Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” boosted the bilateral relationship further. Trump was unmistakably referring to China when he said that an unidentified “country that seeks dominance via pressure, intimidation, and aggression” in his speech. He appeared to suggest, by making that comparison, that the two largest democracies in the world were uniting to confront a common enemy, emphasizing further convergence between them.

## Discussion

The General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIS), signed by the two nations in 2002, was followed by the signing of additional security agreements, including the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). Both countries will access facilities and confidential military data for refuelling and replenishment through these arrangements. At the inaugural “2 + 2 Ministerial Dialogue” in September 2018, the United States and India signed the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (CCSA), the third foundational agreement. Through that deal, India was permitted to purchase specialist technology for secure communications for military systems of US origin that it had bought from the USA. The CCSA is an Indian-specific version of the agreement that the United States inks with its military allies, similar to the LEMOA. The final of the four founding deals, the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement, was signed by both nations in October 2020. Once enacted, it will grant India access to US geospatial maps and the military-grade precision needed for its automated hardware systems and weaponry, such as cruise and ballistic missiles. This is where the Quad comes into play. Initially, the Quad was an informal strategic dialogue between India, the United States, Japan, and Australia in 2007 to discuss issues about the Indian Ocean region. However, in 2017, the Quad naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal sent a strong signal to China that it supports freedom of navigation, rules-based order, and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific region in 2019. In March 2021, a virtual summit with the leaders of the respective nations was organized. For the first time, the leaders released a joint statement as the spirit of the Quad White House 2021. This demonstrates the intensity of US-India relations and the two nations’ compatibility in confronting China in the Indian Ocean region. From this, we can conclude that although India and the US are not officially allies, they are in a quasi-alliance based on shared interests. They are aware of our strategic autonomy, which complicates the current circumstance. For instance, in the recent conflict between Russia and Ukraine, India abstained from voting against Russia most of the time in the UN despite pressure from Europe and the US. They also advised us to ban oil imports, but India didn’t do so. Instead, we are trading rupees and rubles to counteract our recent sanctions against Russia.

The People’s Republic of China and the Republic of India established bilateral relations in 1950. India and China have historically maintained peaceful relations for thousands of years of recorded history, but the harmony of their relationship has varied in modern times, after the Chinese Communist Party’s victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949, and especially post the Annexation of Tibet by the People’s Republic of China. The two nations have sought economic cooperation with each other, while frequent border disputes and economic nationalism in both countries are a major point of contention.

Cultural and economic relations between China and India date back to ancient times. The Silk Road not only served as a major trade route between India and China, but is also credited for facilitating the spread of Buddhism from India to East Asia.<sup>[1]</sup> During the 19th century, China was involved in a growing opium trade with the East India Company, which exported opium grown in India.<sup>[2][3]</sup> During World War II, both British India and the Republic of China (ROC) played a crucial

role in halting the progress of Imperial Japan.<sup>[4]</sup> After India became independent in 1947, it established relations with the ROC. The modern Sino-Indian diplomatic relationship began in 1950, when India was among the first noncommunist countries to end formal relations with the Republic of China and recognise the PRC as the legitimate government of both Mainland China and Taiwan. China and India are two of the major regional powers in Asia, and are the two most populous countries and among the fastest growing major economies in the world.

Growth in diplomatic and economic influence has increased the significance of their bilateral relationship. Between 2008 and 2021, China has been India's largest trading partner, and the two countries have also extended their strategic and military relations.<sup>[5][6][7][8]</sup> However, conflict of interest leads to hostility. India has a large trade deficit that is favoured towards China. The two countries failed to resolve their border dispute and Indian media outlets have repeatedly reported Chinese military incursions into Indian territory.<sup>[9]</sup> And relations between contemporary China and India have been characterised by border disputes, resulting in three military conflicts – the Sino-Indian War of 1962, the border clashes in Nathu La and Cho La in 1967, and the 1987 Sumdorong Chu standoff.<sup>[10]</sup> However, since the late 1980s, both countries have successfully rebuilt diplomatic and economic ties. Since 2013, border disputes have reemerged to take centre stage in the two countries' mutual relations. In early 2018, the two armies got engaged in a standoff at the Doklam plateau along the disputed Bhutan-China border.<sup>[11]</sup> Since summer 2020, armed standoffs and skirmishes at multiple locations along the entire Sino-Indian border escalated. A serious clash occurred in the Galwan Valley, resulting in the death of 20 Indian soldiers and many Chinese soldiers.<sup>[12]</sup> Both countries have steadily established military infrastructure along border areas, including amidst the 2020 China–India skirmishes.<sup>[9][13]</sup> Additionally, India remains wary about China's strong strategic bilateral relations with Pakistan,<sup>[14]</sup> and China's funding to the separatist groups in Northeast India,<sup>[15]</sup> while China has expressed concerns about Indian military and economic activities in the disputed South China Sea<sup>[16]</sup> as well as hosting of anti-China activity from Tibetan exiles.<sup>[17][18]</sup> Today, the South Asian region is the premier site of intensified great power competition between China and India.<sup>[19]</sup>

China and India are separated by the Himalayas. China and India today share a border, with Nepal and Bhutan acting as buffer states. Parts of the disputed Kashmir region claimed by India (J&K and Ladakh) are claimed and administered by either Pakistan (Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan) or by the PRC (Aksai Chin). The Government of Pakistan, on its maps, shows the Aksai Chin area as mostly within China and labels the boundary "Frontier Undefined", while India holds that Aksai Chin is illegally occupied by the PRC. China and India also dispute most of Arunachal Pradesh.

Not only is China's India policy shaped by greater competition with the United States, but there are also real structural issues in India-China relations that exacerbate discord. These stem largely from China's attempts to keep India at arm's length in the Indo-Pacific region. There are clear differences in the regional order in Asia that the two countries desire—India seeks a multipolar order, of which India is one of the main poles, while China seeks a single pole, of which India is not a pole at all.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Results

The United States and Russia (previously Soviet Union) have been a consistent part of developments in Chinese and Indian relations.

As a major power, Japan has also been part of China–India relations, with initiatives such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Pakistan and China share warm relations that drive Chinese infrastructure projects in the disputed territory of northern Kashmir. The Middle East, Latin America, and Africa are places where both India and China engage and compete. The Middle East is important to both countries in terms of their energy security. In Africa, China and India seem most engaged across a wide variety of issues, from development to peacekeeping. In South Asia and South-East Asia, a power balance struggle between China and India is seen in triangular relations.<sup>[182]</sup>

Nepal

Nepal's geostrategic situation during periods of heightened tensions between China and India, such as during the 1962 war, resulted in varying shades of cautionary neutrality when making statements. Nepal's Permanent Representative stated, "we do not want to pass judgement on the merits of Sino-Indian border dispute. As a country friendly to both...". Tulsī Giri, then the Nepalese foreign minister, stated, "Nepal's relations with India will remain close [...] Yet, Nepal has a 600-mile boundary with China, China has now emerged as a great power. Friendly relations with our northern neighbour (China) should be the natural aim of the country's foreign policy."<sup>[183]</sup> During the time Tibet was independent, Nepal played the role as an important buffer state and was central to influence between the regions.<sup>[184]</sup>

The China-Nepal-India Economic Corridor (CNIEC) was proposed by China in April 2018.<sup>[185]</sup> It is an extension of the agreed upon China-Nepal Trans-Himalayan Multi-dimensional Connectivity Network into India. While China and Nepal have shown favourable reactions towards CNIEC, India is "indifferent".<sup>[186]</sup> This indifference is postulated to stem from CNIEC being a part of BRI, China's growing influence over Nepal, and an end to "India's monopoly over Nepal's transit points and Nepal's attempt to end its dependency on India".<sup>[186]</sup>

#### United States

"The gesture that can save is to take a firm line with China, denounce openly her nefarious intentions, stand without reservations by the USA [...] Militarily, China is almost ten times as strong as we are, but India as the spearhead of an American defence of democracy can easily halt Mao's mechanised millions."

On 28 March 1963, Sudhir Ghosh recorded the President of the United States John F Kennedy's reaction on reading Sri Aurobindo's words, "One great Indian, Nehru, showed you the path of non-alignment between China and America, and another great Indian Aurobindo, showed you another way of survival. The choice is up to the people of India." Earlier in the meeting, Ghosh recorded Kennedy's reaction to a letter from Nehru, "He indignantly said that only a few months earlier when Mr Nehru was overwhelmed by the power of Communist China, he made desperate appeal to him for air protection, and non-alignment or no non-alignment, the President had to respond. He added sarcastically that Mr Nehru's conversion lasted only a few days".<sup>[187]</sup>

Unlike the left-wing diplomatic leanings of the Indian Congress Party, the BJP administration has strengthened its strategic partnership with the United States.<sup>[188]</sup> China faces combined challenges to its influence with its neighbors, and because it sees a growing threat from India and the United States' cooperation, it has exaggerated the discord between the two countries to divide and conquer its rivals.<sup>[20]</sup>

India participated in the restart of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue,<sup>[189]</sup> and has strengthened the military, diplomatic, and economic cooperation with the United States, Japan, and Australia.<sup>[189]</sup> More recently, after the deadly Chinese-initiated clash at Galwan Valley in June 2020, preceded by the 2017 Doklam standoff, the U.S.-based think tank, the Center for Foreign Relations, explained that there was a significant ramp-up in QUAD activity.<sup>[190][189][191]</sup> The group cites how, since 2020, the group has looked beyond regional cooperation and have focused on checking Chinese regional behavior, with the four navies performing their first joint exercise in over a decade in November 2020. This was specifically initiated by India in response to the border skirmishes.<sup>[191]</sup>

conflict.<sup>[197]</sup> Initiating the conflict, China took advantage of global concern about the ongoing Cuban missile crisis to time their regional invasion in hopes of building a military road in India's Ladakh region.<sup>[198]</sup>

During the Narendra Modi administration, bloody clashes erupted again on the Sino-Indian border.<sup>[190]</sup> The strategic alliance between China and Pakistan, and the vigorous arming of the Pakistani forces, make India face the threat of a two-front war.<sup>[199]</sup> Indian officials said the huge differences between the two sides on the border issue "eroded the entire basis" of their relationship.<sup>[200]</sup>



## Conclusions

In June 2012, China asserted that "Sino-Indian ties" could be the most "important bilateral partnership of the century", seemingly substantiated by current Prime Minister Narendra Modi's historic visit to China in May 2015.<sup>[216][217]</sup> At that pivotal visit, Wen Jiabao, the Premier of China, and Manmohan Singh, the Prime Minister of India set a goal to increase Indo-Chinese bilateral trade to USD \$100 billion by 2015.<sup>[218]</sup> At the India-China Business Forum in Shanghai, Modi claimed that China and India would pool together their manufacturing capabilities, citing initiative examples, such as building "50 million houses by 2022", "develop[ing] smart cities and mega industrial corridors", and refining FDI policy and modernizing railway systems together.<sup>[217]</sup> Following that conference, bilateral trade between China and India touched USD \$89.6 billion in 2017–18, with the trade deficit widening to US\$62.9 billion in China's favor.<sup>[219][220]</sup> In 2017, the volume of bilateral trade between India & China stood at US\$84.5 billion.<sup>[221]</sup> This figure excludes bilateral trade between India and Hong Kong, which stands at another USD \$34 billion.<sup>[222][223]</sup> Chinese imports from India amounted to \$16.4 billion, or 0.8% of its overall imports, and 4.2% of India's overall exports in 2014. Major commodities exported from India to China were: cotton; gems, precious metals, coins; copper; ores, slag, ash; organic chemicals; salt, sulphur, stone, cement; machines, engines, and pumps. Chinese exports to India amounted to \$58.4 billion or 2.3% of its overall exports, which made up approximately 12.6% of India's overall imports in 2014.<sup>[224][223]</sup> Major commodities exported from China to India were: electronic equipment; machines, engines, pumps; organic chemicals; fertilizers; iron and steel; plastics; iron or steel products; gems, precious metals, coins; ships, boats; medical, and technical equipment.<sup>[224][223]</sup>

In 2020, in a departure from the previous pledges of collaboration, Modi instituted bans on Chinese products, including both intangible apps (Tiktok) and tangible goods (toys and furniture).<sup>[225]</sup> Furthermore, the Modi administration created the Phased Manufacturing Program to encourage India-based cellphone assembly and manufacturing.<sup>[225]</sup> Under guidance from this legislation and the accompanying task force to reduce import dependence, India raised import duties on electronic items produced in China, as well as a laundry list of ancillary goods.<sup>[225]</sup>

In 2018, a Standing Committee on Commerce chaired by Naresh Gujral submitted a report on the 'Impact of Chinese Goods on Indian Industry'.<sup>[225]</sup> The report pointed out insufficient implementation of existing anti-dumping laws, reliance on Chinese raw materials in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, reliance on Chinese imports in India's National Solar Mission, Goods and Services Tax on certain products resulting in increased imports from China, and Indian smart city administrations preferring Chinese bicycles over Indian ones.<sup>[225]</sup> According to a 2021 survey published in ThePrint, 43% of Indians did not buy 'Made in China' products since the Galwan clash the previous year.<sup>[225]</sup> Modi also took notice of Swadeshi Jagran Manch's (SJM) campaigns, launching or reviving 220 out of 370 anti-dumping suits against Chinese items ranging from steels, pharmaceuticals, and chemicals.<sup>[143][225]</sup>

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