

# China-India Brief

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## Guest Column

# The Anniversaries Provide Opportunities, but Sino-Indian Relations Cannot Be Left on Autopilot

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In the annals of Sino-Indian relations, 2025 marks two important anniversaries. In April 1950, India became the first non-socialist country to recognise the newly established People's Republic of China. The Bandung Conference in 1955 showcased India-China solidarity as emerging leaders of the Asian and African countries.

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The *China-India Brief* is a bi-monthly digest focusing on the relationship between Asia's two biggest powers. The Brief provides readers with a key summary of current news articles, reports, analyses, commentaries, and journal articles published in English on the China-India relationship. It features a Guest Column weighing in on key current issues in China-India relations.

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Chinese and Indian leaders **exchanged congratulatory messages** to mark the 75th anniversary of the bilateral diplomatic relations. Meanwhile, China and Indonesia celebrated the Bandung Conference and promoted the “Bandung Spirit” and, by extension, the “Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence.” **These principles**, also known as “**Panchsheel**,” were jointly initiated by China and India, which were later endorsed at the conference.

China and India should seize the occasions to develop a more stable bilateral relationship based on mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. After all, representing nearly 40 percent of the world’s population and with economic development a priority for both, China and India have much to gain through cooperation. However, given the historical baggage of past grievances, unresolved territorial issues, emerging security issues, and the complexity of regional and global geopolitics, a stable Sino-Indian relationship requires vision and leadership. Both countries must prioritise managing existing and potential conflicts and seeking opportunities for cooperation.

### Defining the Sino-Indian Relations: Six “T”s

Scholars of China-India relations typically take one of two approaches to describe the two great civilisations. They either highlight the **deep connections** between China and India through culture, religion and, in the mid-20th century, the brief period of

“Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai” (the Indians and Chinese are brothers), or—more commonly, they focus on their **strategic rivalry** and ongoing **border disputes**. Indeed, apart from the 1950s, when China and India enjoyed a decade of friendship, bilateral relations have largely been characterised by six “T” s: territorial disputes, threat perceptions, trust and distrust, Tibet, triangles (China-India-Pakistan and China-India-US), and trade imbalance.

Territorial disputes remain the most intractable sources of bilateral conflicts and animosity. Over the years, border skirmishes, faceoffs, and direct military conflicts, including a brief war in 1962, have defied solutions even with prolonged but inconclusive negotiations seeking to find solutions to their disputed 3,488 km (2,167 miles) border. The 2017 **Doklam** standoff and the 2020 military clash in the **Galwan Valley** represent the most serious bilateral confrontation in recent years. The subsequent military buildup and infrastructure enhancement on both sides of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) have further heightened tension.

Sino-Indian distrust and mutual suspicions are another barrier to a stable bilateral relationship. These tensions further reinforce mutual threat perceptions and **security dilemma**, which in turn reflect and intensify the strategic rivalry between the two. Ever since the 1962 war and the 1963 Border Agreement between China and

Pakistan, India has viewed the China-Pakistan **“all-weather” strategic partnership** as aimed directly at undermining Indian national interests. Likewise, Beijing views **Delhi’s relationship with Washington** as driven by the latter’s interests in containing China in the Indo-Pacific. Although China may not always support Pakistan’s actions and India might not see its **membership** in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) as China-driven, both sides perceive the other’s policy choices as deliberate, threatening, and hostile in intent. Furthermore, **China’s growing presence** in South Asia, notably via its geo-economic Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is perceived by India as directly encroaching its traditional sphere of influence.

**Tibet** remains a sensitive issue in Sino-Indian relations. China always views India’s position on Tibet, including hosting the exiled Tibetan government and the Dalai Lama with deep suspicions if not open hostility. Delhi recognises Beijing’s sovereignty over the ethnic region, but that has not prevented China from **warning** against Indian “interference” in its domestic affairs, including the succession of the 14th Dalai Lama. Meanwhile, China’s dam-building in Tibet, especially the recently announced \$170 billion **mega hydropower dam**, has become another controversy in bilateral relations and a serious issue for downstream India.

## **“C”-ing A Way Forward: Rethinking Sino-Indian Engagement**

Addressing these challenges require China and India actively pursue four “C”s: communication, crisis management, consultation, and cooperation. Keeping communication channels open can help dispel misunderstandings and apprehension of each other’s intentions and actions. Past experiences suggest that regular and effective communication has proved beneficial to both sides in **dealing with border disputes** and preventing outbreaks of clashes as a result of such activities like patrols, intrusions, encampments, and troop movements along the LAC . This kind of communication has become crucial at a time when their growing capabilities and interests bring them into more frequent contact. **This** leads, in certain areas, to overlapping patrolling and presence, which cause friction and raise mutual concerns. Meanwhile, China’s growing ties with South Asian states, and India’s increasing engagement in Southeast Asia, in addition to its Quad membership, are viewed by each as the other’s encroachment of one’s spheres of influence. Nevertheless, both countries’ policies appear guided by their strategic calculations rather than deliberate, zero-sum designs to undermine the other.

Developing effective crisis management mechanisms and protocols for handling bilateral conflicts in the border region are

are becoming ever more imperative between the two nuclear-armed Asian powers. The Sino-Indian agreements on confidence-building measures (1993/1996) and **political principles** for settling border disputes (2005) commit both sides to pursue a political settlement of their territorial disputes and impose specific restrictions on **the use of arms**. These restrictions have helped prevent greater casualties during the recent border skirmishes. The ongoing corps commander-level meetings have reinforced mutual commitments to the agreed protocols, reduced tensions, and facilitated orderly **military disengagement** from the LAC. Crisis management and conflict prevention mechanisms should be further strengthened. Neither China nor India can unilaterally gain territorial advantages without risking escalation to a serious conflict.

China and India are both rising powers in regional affairs and on the global stage. They share **memberships** in many multilateral groupings from the Group of Twenty (G20) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the BRICS. As two of the largest developing countries, **China and India can exert significant influence** on key issues such as climate change, financial reform, global governance, international trade, and development aid, through closer consultation and policy coordination. Such cooperation can advance their mutual

interests while also advancing the interests of the Global South.

Promoting economic development remains the policy priorities for both China and India. China has recently faced significant headwinds, including slowing economy, declining population, and challenge of restructuring its development model. In contrast, India has registered vibrant growth rates, enjoyed a population dividend, and is attracting foreign investment. **The two countries' economies** remain rather complementary and the potential for future expansion remains promising. China has overtaken the US as India's largest trading partner. However, the size of **the trade imbalance**, at close to \$100 billion in China's favour, is not sustainable and needs to be addressed through greater market access for India and investment flows from China. In addition, China and India should also promote trade and investment with the expanded BRICS to facilitate **intra-block economic cooperation**.

China and India have gradually restored bilateral relations since the fatal clash in Galwan Valley in 2020. Official contacts have resumed, as have been leaders' meetings. The 75th anniversary in diplomatic relations and the 70th anniversary of the Bandung Conference provide a unique opportunity for the two countries to build a stable relationship through effective management of their disputes and differences. The "dragon-elephant tangle" and the realisation of



the “Asian Century” will remain elusive, with the “boom and bust” cycle in bilateral relations likely to repeat itself. This will continue unless the leaders commit to setting a vision for the bilateral relationship. Without such leadership, both sides risk becoming victims of great power politics, allowing the Sino-Indian relationship to be defined as an emerging strategic rivalry.

This leadership needs to be clear-eyed, pragmatic, and bold, and must be able to chart a new course for the bilateral relationship. It should focus less on tactic manoeuvres and gains; rather, it should offer a strategic vision for Beijing and Delhi to agree on and work with. It must overcome the entrenched and stereotyped views of each other and redefine Sino-Indian relations from the perspective of what can be achieved together. **Rajiv Gandhi’s historic 1988 visit** to China was an instance of visionary leadership that looked toward the future rather than being burdened with the past, and one that is much needed today.

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