

# China-India Brief

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## *Guest Column*

# China-India Relations: De-Americanisation Is Underway

By Li Li

## *An Emerging Thaw*

The Kazan Summit in October 2024 between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi marked a thaw between the two Asian giants after a four-and-a-half-year border standoff. Following the Summit, China agreed to reopen its border to Indian pilgrims to visit Mount Kailash/Gang Renpoche and Lake Manasarovar/Mapam Yun Tso in China's Tibet

  
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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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Autonomous Region. The rapprochement accelerated in August 2025, when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi officially visited New Delhi. Meeting Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, he secured a broader consensus with India on concrete measures to improve the bilateral relationship.

On the border, both sides agreed on several new steps: establishing new mechanisms to explore Early Harvest outcomes in boundary delimitation and strengthening border management; creating General-Level Mechanisms in the Eastern and Middle Sectors alongside the existing one in the Western Sector; re-opening the border trade; and exchanging views on **trans-border rivers cooperation**, among others. Beyond the boundary issue, they committed to **resuming** various dialogue mechanisms, facilitating trade and investment flows, expanding people-to-people exchange, and improving coordination on major global and regional issues.

Modi's visit to China in late August 2025 reinforced the emerging thaw. During the Xi-Modi meeting, both leaders reaffirmed that China and India are partners rather than rivals, a message echoed in India's renewed engagement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The resumption of direct flights in October 2025 added further momentum. As political tensions ease, prospects for deeper economic cooperation are widening, with firms on both countries actively

**exploring the new opportunities** for commercial partnership.

## The Past Americanisation of China-India Relations

An emerging paradigm of “de-Americanisation” now shapes the trajectory of China-India ties. Since the end of the Cold War, the US has been a defining external factor in the bilateral relations, a dynamic can be described as “Americanisation.” This influence unfolded in two distinct phases, each shaped by different US roles, which in turn produced markedly different effects on China-India engagement.

In the unipolar moment of the 1990s and 2000s, China and India shared an interest in countering the US unipolarity and advancing a multipolar world, even though India and US reached a nuclear deal in 2005. These goals underpinned a period of bilateral cooperation. Both sides made significant progress on the border issue, reflected in the 1993 and 1996 Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) agreements, the establishment of the Special Representatives mechanism in 2003, and an agreement on the political parameters and guiding principles for border settlement in 2005. During the 2000s, both countries even committed to establishing a strategic and cooperative partnership. By 2008, China had overtaken the US as India's largest trading partner. On the multilateral front, they collaborated with Russia, Brazil, and later South Africa to create the BRICS grouping and institutionalised Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral dialogue. The main

purposes of the BRICS and RIC were considered to be “countering” against the US unipolarity.

China’s emergence as the world’s second-largest economy in 2010 contributed to a trend toward a more bipolar international system. The US gradually shifted its strategic focus from counter-terrorism to balancing China: the Obama administration pursued a Pivot to Asia strategy, the Trump administration launched an Indo-Pacific strategy, and the Biden administration implemented “extreme competition” against China. In this context, the US viewed India as a “lynchpin” partner and strengthened its strategic outreach and support to India in order to help India become a competent counterbalance to China. India also found greater common ground with the US in promoting a multipolar Asia to **prevent Chinese dominance in the region**. Seizing the intensified US-China competition as a **strategic opportunity**, India proactively embraced the Indo-Pacific framework and deepened its strategic cooperation with the US across multiple fronts.

Due to the complexity of China’s geopolitical surroundings, India has never been its strategic focus. In contrast, China is often perceived by India as a major security threat. This asymmetry in threat perceptions, with China being relatively more optimistic about its ties with India, has shaped the bilateral interactions. The deepening Indo-US strategic alignment has, however, altered China’s assessment. The US’s Indo-Pacific strategy, which positioned

China as the rival and India as a partner, extends the US security challenges to China from the Asia-Pacific to the Bay of Bengal and the Indian subcontinent. It leaves China with a two-front threat from the east and the west. Put differently, China viewed India’s military build-up in the border areas primarily through a bilateral lens, confident in managing potential difficulties. However, the strong presence of China and India in the US Indo-Pacific strategy compels China to evaluate the extent to which US support could embolden India to take greater risks along the border, and whether India’s actions might be coordinated with US moves in critical flashpoints like Taiwan Street or the South China Sea.

Consequently, Beijing views New Delhi as an incremental security concern. The 2017 and 2020 border standoffs between China and India should be interpreted against this backdrop.

### The Age of De-Americanisation

The emerging de-Americanisation of China-India relations reflects a waning inclination in both countries to frame their ties through US influence. Trump’s second term marked a main driver of this shift. A series of adjustments under his second presidency have consolidated his authority and removed many domestic constraints. This enabled the Trump administration and the broader “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) movement to materialise the “America First” doctrine. US foreign policy has consequently tilted toward unilateralism, protectionism and transactionalism.

For India, the unreliability of the Trump administration became apparent when Washington abruptly imposed a 50 percent tariff on Indian goods in August 2025. At the same time, the US Indo-Pacific strategy appears to be giving way to tariff wars and Trump's renewed focus on homeland security and the Western Hemisphere. Faced with incrementally unpredictable US policies toward allies and partners, India **recognises** that the Indo-US strategic relationship could no longer be taken for granted. This prompts New Delhi to recalibrate its foreign policy, including its approach to China. Should India edge back to a posture resembling non-alignment, and China's two-front challenge eases accordingly, China's concerns about closer India-US ties will naturally diminish.

De-Americanisation in China-India relations will ease both countries out of the China-US-India triangle and create greater space to pursue areas of practical cooperation. Priorities include sustaining durable peace and stability along the border, realising the potential of bilateral economic cooperation, and maintaining growth momentum in a de-globalised world. Beyond bilateral concerns, the two countries could work together to promote peace and development in Asia, especially in their shared neighbourhood, while strengthening global governance and advancing multilateralism amid increasing global fragmentation.

While the de-Americanisation is underway,

challenges in China-India relations persist. First, an established geopolitical mindset continues to shape expectations. When Trump's "Liberation Day" tariff on India remained modest in April, India was relatively optimistic and referred to the ongoing tariff war as a **"lifetime opportunity."** Indian Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal indicated a preference to work **with the developed world instead of China** on international trade. This is also reflected in a popular view on both sides arguing that the current thaw may prove short-lived, with India potentially recalibrating toward Washington once Trump 2.0 concludes. Second, the mutual trust deficit remains substantial. It is a structural problem that predates recent India-US friction, which will require sustained political investment to address. Third, the competition between China and India extends beyond the border issue. As the world's largest emerging economies, they are more likely to compete in multiple domains. Managing such competition will be demanding.

Despite ongoing challenges and uncertainties, the trend of de-Americanisation is set to continue offering more new opportunities for China-India relations.

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