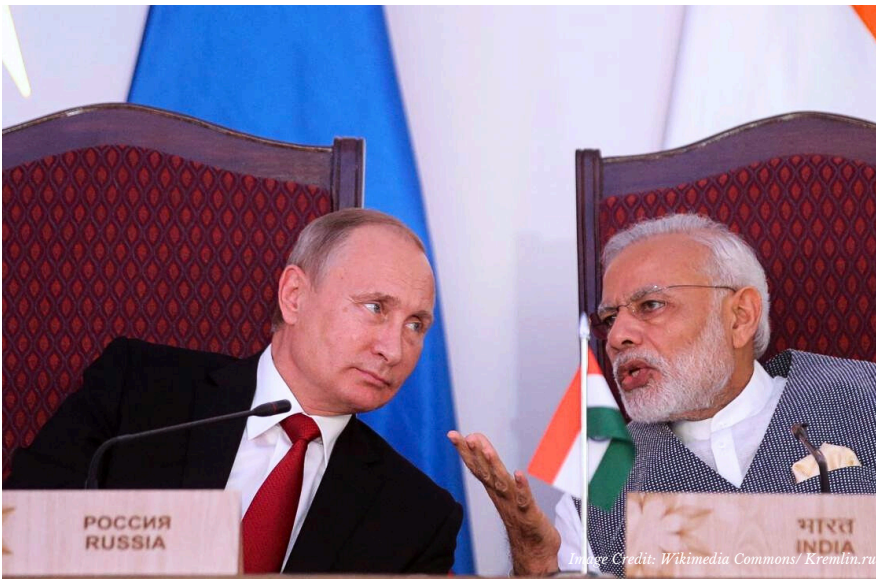


China-India Brief

A publication of the Centre on Asia and Globalisation



Guest Column

The Russia Factor in China-India Relations

By Ivan Lidarev

Russia plays a unique role in China-India relations. As Moscow has partnered with both Beijing and Delhi and is closer to each Asian giant than they are to each other, it has emerged as a trusted third party, a position that no other country enjoys. The originator of the idea of a China-India-Russia troika in the 1990s, Russia has consistently promoted cooperation between China and India in the Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and BRICS formats.


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CENTRE ON ASIA
AND GLOBALISATION

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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Significantly, with its relative isolation from the West and wartime difficulties, Moscow has doubled down on building closer relations with both China and India, making it a stakeholder in their bilateral relationship.

This unique role has helped Russia emerge as a stabilising factor in China-India relations. While Moscow alone cannot ensure the stability of the China-India relationship, Russia helps stabilise rocky China-India relations in three ways.

Helping India to “soft balance” China

Russia stabilises China-India relations by helping Delhi “soft balance” Beijing’s power. This enables India to restore some balance in the deeply asymmetric China-India relationship and engage Beijing from a stronger position. Of course, India’s relationships with the US and Japan provide a greater counterweight to China. However, they also threaten China’s security and push Beijing to respond harshly, infringing on India’s security and destabilising relations. In contrast, Russia offers a way of soft balancing China, without these drawbacks.

There are several ways in which Russia helps India “soft balance” China. First, partnership with Moscow helps Delhi dilute China’s leverage in key international clubs. It prevents Chinese **domination of SCO**, an organisation founded and increasingly instrumentalised by Beijing, and offsets Chinese power in BRICS. Second, partnering with Moscow in trade and connectivity helps India push back against the prospect of Chinese economic and infrastructure dominance in Eurasia

through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Initiatives like the North-South transportation corridor and the recent push for a free trade agreement between India and the Russia-dominated **Eurasian Economic Union** serve to counter China’s growing influence in Central Asia and Iran. Third, Russia is an important **Indian partner in Afghanistan**. While Delhi has recently made inroads in Afghanistan, it remains in a weaker position than China, whose interests are mostly aligned with Pakistan’s, and hence needs to cooperate with Moscow. Fourth, with its export of arms, willingness to share military technologies, and cooperation in space, nuclear energy, and potentially **global positioning systems**, Moscow strengthens India’s position and narrows the military and technological gap between India and China. Finally, the India-Russia partnership keeps Beijing slightly off balance by suggesting that Russia is not fully aligned with China and not fully reliable, thus increasing Delhi’s power position vis-à-vis Beijing.

Confidence building

Moscow also helps to stabilise China-India relations by building confidence between the two sides and reassuring them. Engagement with a relatively trusted third power, with which both sides maintain partnerships but no major points of contention, serves to build confidence between two rivals who profoundly mistrust each other. More practically, this confidence has enabled Russia to serve as an intermediary between China and India.

Moscow has facilitated dialogue between the two sides, for instance during the **2020 China-India border crisis**, and promoted confidence building measures such as participation in Russian military exercises like **Zapad 2022** and trilateral **think-tank dialogues**. Moscow's position as a trusted partner even enabled it to successfully lobby Beijing to accept Indian membership in the SCO, helping achieve a rare high point in China-India relations.

Moreover, Russia's partnership with each side reassures the other by reducing its strategic concerns and thus creates mutual trust. For China, the partnership between India and the reliably anti-American Russia ensures that Delhi will not veer excessively toward the US and rely exclusively on the West for arms and political support at the UN. Without its partnership with Moscow, India will have no major non-Western partner and will find it much more **difficult to stay unaligned** with the US in the face of its rivalry with China. Hence, Russia helps India preserve its strategic autonomy, a major **consideration for Beijing**, and alleviates China's concerns that Delhi might join a US containment of China.

For India, its partnership with Moscow reassures Delhi that China will not be able to build an international order in Eurasia which excludes India and eventually threatens its position in South Asia. Hence, Russia helps reduce India's China-related concerns of encirclement and reassures Delhi of its place in the emerging Eurasian international system.

Strengthening the ideological basis of China-India relations

Russia also stabilises China-India relations by strengthening their ideological basis. Moscow, Beijing, and Delhi broadly share a vision of international relations, although with some **variation**. This vision is centred on the pursuit of a multipolar world in which major powers play the leading role and have spheres of interest. It also favours the sovereign nation state over concerns about human rights and democracy promotion. Importantly, this vision and its policy agenda are embodied in formats like SCO, BRICS, and RIC, and represent one of the few mostly cooperative sides of the often-competitive China-India relationship. This multipolar vision has come up in joint statements and comments in **SCO summits** and **bilateral meetings** between the three sides.

Russia played an important role in promoting this vision in **Beijing-Delhi relations**. The vision was first proposed by Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov and was at the core of his push to promote **China-India-Russia cooperation to limit US unipolarity**. It also served as the foundation for the emergence of the RIC trilateral and later BRICS. A revisionist Russia in a conflict with the West has been a vocal advocate of this multipolar vision and has pushed it forward in its **bilateral statements** with China and India, helping to affirm its place in their foreign policies.

Russian sponsorship has partly insulated this vision from the vicissitudes of the China-India relationship and helped institutionalise it in Beijing and Delhi's understanding of international relations and in the policy programmes of SCO and BRICS. All this has helped the multipolar vision emerge as a political and ideological bridge between China and India despite their disagreements. It has also reaffirmed their shared identities as members of the Global South and countries that want to transform the international system.

Conclusion

In short, Russia is a stabilising factor in China-India relations. However, there are limitations to such a role. First, as Russia is becoming more dependent on China, it might align more closely with Beijing and be less able to act as a neutral third party. While Moscow and Delhi have increased their engagement to prevent this outcome, it will depend on Russia's position after the end of the war in Ukraine. Second, a US rapprochement with China might change the dynamics of Russia-China-India relations and diminish Moscow's importance for China and hence its stabilising role. Finally, a massive military crisis on the China-India border might reduce Russia's space for stabilising Beijing-Delhi relations, as happened between 2020 and 2024.

Even with these limitations, Russia is likely to continue playing a stabilising role in China-India relations due to its partnerships with both sides, key role in SCO and BRICS, and geopolitical importance for Beijing and Delhi.

Dr Ivan Lidarev is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore (ISAS-NUS).

News Reports

Bilateral Relations

India frees up visas for Chinese professionals in key step to boost ties

The Straits Times, December 12

India has eased procedures to fast-track business visas for Chinese professionals, officials said, aiming to boost ties and reduce costly delays caused by technician shortages.

India seeks assurance from Beijing that it won't target Indians in transit through China

The Straits Times, December 8

India has demanded guarantees from China to prevent the arbitrary detention or harassment of its citizens transiting Chinese airports, following the detention of an Indian national in Shanghai.

How 17th century Dalai Lama could test China-India border thaw

South China Morning Post, December 4

India has convened the first international conference on the sixth Dalai Lama in a disputed Himalayan area. Observers say the move could test the fragile thaw in India-China relations.

Robot sighting at India-China border raises concerns about Chinese surveillance

India Today, December 3

A widely shared but unverified video has triggered online speculation about Chinese deployment of a humanoid robot along the India-China border. The clip shows a motionless, human-like figure in hilly terrain, prompting debate over possible technological surveillance.

China and India in the Region

India and Russia are creating a framework to boost bilateral trade to \$100 billion by 2030: Envoy

The Economic Times, December 17

India and Russia plan to raise bilateral trade to \$100bn by 2030. Moscow seeks diversification beyond energy and defence, offering digital support for India's Smart City programme.

What is the New Bloc Plan by Pakistan, backed by China, against India?

India Today, December 10

Pakistan's plan for a China-backed regional bloc is sparking debate in South Asia, with questions over India's response, SAARC's future, and participation by smaller nations.

World becoming more multi-polar makes compelling case for deeper multilateralism: Jaishankar

The Hindu, December 8

In his address at the opening ceremony of a key UNESCO meeting, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said the world's growing multipolarity calls for "deeper multilateralism" and shared prosperity through mutual respect.

China positive on Putin's India visit; calls for stronger trilateral cooperation

The Hindu, December 8

China reacted positively to Putin's visit to India, saying robust India-Russia-China relations benefit their own interests and promote peace and stability in the region and globally.

Trade and Economy

Asia Gold: India gold discounts widen as prices hit record high; China demand muted

Reuters, December 12

India's gold dealers offered discounts up to \$34 per ounce, up from \$22, as domestic demand slowed. Chinese buyers stayed subdued amid high spot prices and volatility.

Electronics sector seeks Chinese investments: Wants ownership limited to 26%

Times of India, December 10

India's electronics sector pushes for 26%-capped Chinese joint ventures to simplify approvals and spur advanced component production.

India seeks bigger slice of China's expanding tea market at buyer-seller meet

Reuters, December 4

India aims to boost tea exports to China, with Darjeeling and Masala varieties increasingly appealing to consumers accustomed to green tea.

India's seafood exports rise, led by EU, China, Vietnam

The Economic Times, December 3

India's seafood exports rose 11.6% to \$4.69bn in April–October FY26, driven by shipments to the EU, China, Vietnam, Russia, and the UK. Gains offset losses from high US tariffs imposed from August 2025.

Energy and Environment

India says no advisory to stop clean energy funding

Reuters, December 8

India's clean energy ministry denied issuing guidance to halt new financing, countering reports that lenders were urged to proceed cautiously on solar module projects.

China funnelled \$80 billion into overseas cleantech in past year, report says

Reuters, December 8

China's overseas clean tech investments hit \$80bn in the past year as firms sought to offload excess supply. Global partnerships strengthened after US tariffs, taking total green tech investment since 2023 past \$180bn.

Putin says Russia ready to supply 'uninterrupted' fuel to India

BBC, December 5

Russian President Vladimir Putin assured India of continued fuel supplies, challenging US pressure to stop Russian oil imports. He noted the US itself purchases nuclear fuel from Russia.

China and India import more thermal coal, but price gains may weigh

Reuters, December 4

China and India's thermal coal imports rose in November, though higher prices may limit further gains. China received 30.96 million tons, up from 29.18 million in October.

Analyses

South Asian States Seek Cooperation— Without India

Foreign Policy, December 17

By Sumit Ganguly, Senior Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution

India faces increasing regional isolation as Pakistan and China push for a new trilateral organisation with Bangladesh, potentially excluding New Delhi. This development heightens security and diplomatic challenges, forcing India to rebuild trust and influence with its neighbours.

Chinese Think Tanks in the Xi Jinping Era and Implications for Indian Engagement

**Centre for Social and Economic Progress,
December 17**

By Shruti Jargad, Non-Resident Research Associate in the Foreign Policy Vertical

Chinese think tanks under Xi provide controlled policy advice at home and promote Beijing's narratives abroad. India should engage strategically, balancing critical scrutiny with practical dialogue, and invest in its own think tanks to manage asymmetries and develop robust China expertise.

Dispatch from New Delhi: Another India- China flare-up is coming

Atlantic Council, December 10

*By Michael Kugelman, Senior Fellow for South Asia at the Atlantic Council; Srujan Palkar
Global India Fellow at the Atlantic Council*

India's recent efforts to stabilise ties with China reflect tactical hedging to manage border risks and geopolitical strain, not a reconciliation, underscoring that enduring India–China rivalry continues to shape New Delhi's relations with both Washington and Moscow.

The India Trump Made

Foreign Affairs, December 3

*By James Crabtree, Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations;
Rudra Chaudhuri, Director of Carnegie India*

India's close ties with the US have delivered economic and defence gains, but Trump-era pressures and US outreach to Pakistan have prompted New Delhi to pursue multialignment. Europe, alongside middle powers, offers technology, investment, and security partnerships that help India hedge against US unpredictability and Chinese competition.

India's Future Strategic Choices:

Complications of Mass

CSIS, December 2

By Richard M. Rossow, Senior Adviser and Chair on India and Emerging Asia Economics at CSIS

India's growing economy and strategic footprint will make it harder to remain a bridge between competing powers, as China's strength compels deeper partnerships and its role as a balancing power is challenged. Engagement with the Global South could help India maintain strategic autonomy and shape its influence in a multipolar world.

Books and Journals

China Aspires to be an Environmental Leader: How Should the Rest of the World Engage?

**Journal of Current Chinese Affairs,
December 2025**

By Tyler Harlan, Yixian Sun, Juliet Lu, Jessica DiCarlo, Coraline Goron, Yifei Li, Jessica C. Liao, KuoRay Mao, Jesse Rodenbiker, Deborah Seligsohn, Alex Wang, Niklas Weins, and Annah Lake Zhu

China has transformed from a laggard into a rising leader in environmental governance. It now plays a distinctive and indispensable role in advancing environmental cooperation, financing and implementing global green infrastructure, and generating and disseminating environmental technologies and scientific knowledge. Progress on each of these fronts is difficult without China's participation, particularly amid the United States' retreat from global leadership under the second Trump presidency.

This article examines China's concrete and multifaceted environmental efforts over the past decade and identifies the diverse motivations behind them. China is responding in part to criticism of its vast environmental footprint, in part to a desire for greater recognition as a responsible global power, and in part to the economic



and political opportunities associated with the clean energy transition, a greener planet, and a more stable climate. The article calls for new approaches to engaging China's aspiration to become a global environmental leader, while asserting clear expectations and responsibilities in that role.

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The Centre on Asia and Globalisation is a research centre at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. It conducts in-depth research on developments in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, and aims to provide academics, decision-makers, and the general public with objective analysis on issues of regional and global significance. The Centre's motto "Objective Research with Impact" reflects its commitment towards ensuring that its analysis informs policy and decision makers in and about Asia.

OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

- *Indira Gandhi and the Years that Transformed India* by Srinath Raghavan (Yale University Press, 2025)
- *Partnership or Polarization? Southeast Asian Security between India and China* edited by Evan Laksmana and Byron Chong (Contemporary Southeast Asia, 2023)
- *Asian Conceptions of International Order: What Asia Wants* edited by Kanti Bajpai and Evan Laksmana (International Affairs, 2023)
- *How Realist Is India's National Security Policy?* edited by Kanti Bajpai (Routledge, 2023)
- *Deterring Conflict and Preserving Peace in Asia* edited by Drew Thompson and Byron Chong (Centre on Asia and Globalisation, 2022)
- *What Can the United States Learn from China about Infrastructure?* by Selina Ho in *The China Questions 2* (Harvard University Press, 2022)
- *India Versus China: Why they are Not Friends* by Kanti Bajpai (Juggernaut Books, 2021)
- *Winning the Fight Taiwan Cannot Afford to Lose* by Drew Thompson (Strategic Forum, 2021)



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