

China-India Brief

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Guest Column

Sino-Indian Relations: A Temporary Respite

By Sumit Ganguly

At the end of August 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India met with President Xi Jinping on the eve of the **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in Tianjin** in the People's Republic of China. At this meeting, the first since Chinese and Indian troops had clashed in the spring of 2020 in the Himalayan region of Ladakh, the two sides reaffirmed their interest in reaching a resolution of their outstanding border dispute. Despite this stated commitment to resolve the border issue, Sino-Indian relations remain fraught. The underlying sources of their enduring rivalry remain and are **unlikely to abate anytime soon**.



The *China-India Brief* is a 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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Quite apart from the border dispute, the two states have self-images as great powers in Asia and beyond. The PRC, however, sees India as an **upstart** that should not aspire to be in the same league as itself. Furthermore, Beijing has long had a close set of diplomatic and military ties with India's long-standing adversary, Pakistan. In recent years, this strategic partnership has been strengthened owing to their **mutual discord** with New Delhi. Indeed, during the most recent India-Pakistan crisis in May of last year, Islamabad extensively relied on an array of Chinese-supplied weaponry. More to the point, there is evidence that Beijing **provided** real-time intelligence and surveillance capabilities to Islamabad during the height of the crisis. This Sino-Pakistani nexus, which clearly impinges on India's security concerns, is unlikely to end anytime soon as both states see much mutual benefit in sustaining it.

Second only to the unresolved border dispute, the Sino-Pakistani security link is easily the most troubling issue for India in its relations with the PRC. However, beyond this matter, the Sino-Indian rivalry has a host of other dimensions. At an international level, Beijing has been concerned about the growing closeness between New Delhi and Washington, DC over the past two and a half decades. Admittedly, this bonhomie, in recent months has frayed largely due to differences over **President Trump's ostensible role** in ensuring a ceasefire in May. **India's unwillingness** to concede that he played such a role has led to diplomatic row and even the imposition of punishing tariffs for other stated reasons.

Despite this public rift, there is little reason to believe that the US is about to abandon its security partnership with India. Even a cursory examination of the recently announced **United States National Security Strategy** underscores the importance that the US accords India within its Indo-Pacific strategy. It also highlights the continued salience that Washington, DC attaches to the Quadrilateral Security Initiative (QUAD), even as it exhorts India to assume greater burden sharing within the entity. Furthermore, planned **sophisticated weapons sales** are still under way. Most importantly, the two parties **extended** an existing defense cooperation agreement for another decade even as the issue of tariffs continued to roil relations. Beijing, which has watched the evolution of this defence partnership with concern, cannot be oblivious of these developments even as New Delhi and Washington, DC continue to wrangle over the contentious trade issue.

At a regional level, the Sino-Indian rivalry remains alive and well. Beijing has repeatedly and deftly exploited India's tensions with its smaller neighbours. For example, it has adroitly stepped into the breach in Indo-Nepalese relations. Ties between the two states have been bumpy since India resorted to an **informal blockade of Nepal** in 2015 over an issue related to the domestic politics of both states. New Delhi's ham-fisted tactics, which underscored Kathmandu's economic vulnerability quite understandably contributed to a layer of distrust within Nepal's foreign policy elite. Sensing an opportunity to widen this rift, **Beijing**

quickly entered the fray. Amongst other matters, it promptly provided Nepal with a substantial quantity of much-needed gasoline to ease the effects of **India's blockade**.

Beijing has also sought to extend its influence in Bhutan, a Himalayan kingdom where India has historically held sway. Unlike in the Nepalese case, however, the PRC resorted to arm-twisting in its dealings with Thimpu. This came about when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) units **made encroachments** in a disputed area in the Doklam Plateau in 2017. India came to Bhutan's assistance and temporarily stopped the PLA incursions. However, it was unable to prevent a **re-occupation** of the disputed areas, thereby underscoring the limits of its military capabilities. This episode reminded the Bhutanese that, despite their close diplomatic and security ties with India, New Delhi has limited ability to ward off Chinese efforts to infringe on what it deems to be its own territory.

Even in the Indian Ocean where the Indian Navy should be able to hold its own, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has started to unfurl its flag. In recent years, Chinese naval vessels, some of them ostensibly research ships, have been **docking in Sri Lanka**. New Delhi has expressed its misgivings to Colombo about these developments, but to little avail.

All these developments at multiple levels highlight an uncomfortable truth: despite New Delhi's recent efforts to paper over its differences with Beijing, the two parties fundamentally remain at odds and are likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The unresolved border dispute, especially given the growing economic, military and diplomatic asymmetries between the two states, is a manifestation of the underlying sources of **discord**. Unless New Delhi proves willing to simply accept its subordinate status, the rivalry, despite the current relaxation of tensions, will persist.

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