

China-India Brief

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Guest Column

Importance of Transboundary River Data Sharing Between India and China

By Neeraj Singh Manhas

In a recent high-level diplomatic engagement during the 23rd **Meeting** of the Special Representatives (SRs) of India and China, India's National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval visited China and met Mr Wang Yi, a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and Minister of Foreign Affairs. This dialogue signals a cautious but noteworthy effort to normalise relations between the two Asian giants. Amid

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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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unresolved tensions, particularly the border stand-off along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), both nations appear to be inching toward pragmatic cooperation in critical areas, such as the **sharing** of transboundary river data.

Around half of the world's population **depends** on 310 transboundary lake and river basins that span across 151 nations. Many of these basins are shared by India and China, the region's two largest riparians, and their neighbours. However, **nearly** 60 percent of these shared water resources lack agreements or frameworks for collaborative management. India and China **share** three major transboundary basins: the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna (GBM), the Indus, and the Irrawaddy. The exchange of water data and information is widely recognised as a cornerstone of cooperation. This principle is embedded in the evolution of water treaties, which focused on allocation between riparian states.

Currently, **two key international** conventions guide transboundary water management: the 1992 United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes, and the 1997 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (UNWCC). Both conventions emphasise the importance of gathering, exchanging, and sharing water resource information. **Article 9** of the UNWCC mandate the regular exchange of data on

watercourse conditions, including hydrological, meteorological, hydrogeological, and ecological aspects. Similarly, **Article 13** of the UNECE Convention allows riparian states to request unavailable data from neighboring states, with compliance potentially subject to reasonable charges for data collection and processing. Transboundary water cooperation is monitored globally **under** the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6.5.2, which emphasises the efficient management of shared water resources.

India and China are involved in a **limited number** of bilateral water agreements. Despite sharing significant transboundary basins, agreements that directly involve the two nations are scarce. Existing agreements prioritise procedural rules, focusing on information-sharing and technical cooperation, including emergency notifications. Key agreements include the 2002 **Memorandum of Understanding** (MoU) on the Yaluzangbu/Brahmaputra River, under which China provides hydrological data to India twice daily during the flood season (June 1 to October 15). This agreement, renewed every five years, has been extended to expand the data-sharing period, most notably in 2013. The MoU expired in June 2023 and is currently undergoing renegotiations. **Another agreement**, the 2005 MoU on the Langqen Zangbo/Sutlej River, facilitated hydrological data sharing but expired in 2020, and renewal discussions are ongoing. Under the 2014 Implementation Plan, India has to pay

an **annual fee** of CNY 850,000 for hydrological data. Additionally, the **Expert Level Mechanism**, which was established in 2006, serves as a platform to discuss data sharing, emergency measures, and related issues. While these agreements reflect incremental progress, they lack the comprehensive scope required to address all of the key elements of transboundary water governance.

Despite the potential for a general framework agreement, there are **several factors** that have hindered comprehensive water governance. Geopolitical and national interests, along with regional politics and conflicting national priorities, have complicated treaty negotiations, often stalling efforts. Furthermore, India and China have primarily relied on non-binding arrangements, such as MoUs and joint declarations, to manage shared waters.

The absence of binding legal frameworks means that current agreements must rely on mutual goodwill rather than enforceable mechanisms. Hydropower development conflicts also present significant challenges. China's current proposed **Medog Hydropower Dam** near the Indian border has raised concerns over water flow control, potential dry-season shortages, sudden flood risks, sediment disruption affecting agriculture, and biodiversity loss in downstream regions of India and Bangladesh. Geopolitical concerns include China's unilateral control over the Brahmaputra, lack of a water-sharing treaty, and the risk of weaponising water in disputes.

The dam's location in a seismically active region also raises fears of dam failure, threatening downstream populations. India has since proposed countermeasures, such as the development of a hydropower project in Arunachal Pradesh, to mitigate potential risks.

China has positioned hydropower as a key element of its strategy to achieve net-zero emissions by 2060, as **outlined** in its 14th Five-Year Plan. Significant projects are planned along the Yarlung Tsangpo-Brahmaputra River, **including** seven mainstream dams and eighteen dams on tributaries. In contrast, India's hydropower development has faced domestic opposition, financial constraints, and technical challenges. This has limited its capacity to match China's ambitions and scale of development.

The revival of dialogue on transboundary water management reflects a shared recognition of the need to insulate water diplomacy from broader geopolitical disputes. Functional cooperation in this area has broader implications for other **transnational challenges**, such as climate change and regional trade. Transparent and timely data-sharing mechanisms can prevent disasters, enhance regional stability, and foster trust between the two nations.

Meaningful progress in transboundary water governance requires sustained efforts and mutual trust. To achieve this, both nations must institutionalise mechanisms to ensure accountability, transparency, and continuity.

They should prioritise the development of a binding legal framework to address the equitable and reasonable use of the shared resource, early notifications, and environmental impact assessments. At the same time, both India and China should leverage existing platforms like the Expert Level Mechanism to expand dialogue and foster collaboration for the sustainable use of water resources. The visit by NSA Doval and the willingness of Chinese officials to engage in discussions represent a shared understanding on the importance of water governance and a crucial opportunity to strengthen cooperation between both Asian giants. It is now up to both governments to translate this dialogue into tangible outcomes that would benefit their citizens and the region at large. Water knows no boundaries—and neither should efforts for peace and cooperation.

Neeraj Singh Manhas is the Special Advisor for South Asia at the Parley Policy Initiative, Republic of Korea. He is also a subject matter expert on Water Security in South Asia, India-China Hydropolitics, Climate Security and Transboundary Rivers, at the Centre for Joint Warfare Studies (CENJOWS), Ministry of Defence, Government of India. He has published his writings for renowned institutions such as the Institute for Security & Development Policy, (ISDP) in Sweden, the Pacific Forum in Hawaii, the Lowy Institute in Australia, the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore, the Jamestown Foundation in Washington DC. He tweets on X (formerly Twitter) [@The_China_Chap](#).

Vietnam's Approach in Navigating China-India Rivalry

By Bich Tran

Introduction

China and India occupy prominent positions in Vietnam's foreign policy architecture. Both powers hold the status of comprehensive strategic partners—the highest level in Vietnam's hierarchy of foreign relationships. However, the Sino-Indian rivalry, characterised by territorial disputes and competition for regional influence, presents a complex challenge for Hanoi. This article examines how Vietnam has managed its relationships with these two major powers while maintaining its strategic autonomy.

China and India in Vietnam's Foreign Policy

Vietnam established a strategic partnership with India in **2007**, recognising New Delhi's growing strategic importance. This partnership was upgraded to a comprehensive strategic level in **2016**, reflecting deepening cooperation across multiple domains. Its significance had further increased within the framework of India's Act East Policy, which considers the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as a central pillar.

While China formalised its partnership with Vietnam a year after India, it attained comprehensive strategic partner status from the outset in **2008**. This reflected the



complexity of Sino-Vietnamese relations. Despite the ongoing disputes in the South China Sea, China remains crucial to Vietnam's economic development and regime survival.

Strengthening ties with both China and India aligns with Vietnam's longstanding principle of diversifying external relations, which seeks to build partnerships with multiple major powers and avoiding overdependence on any single partner. Despite the heightened tensions between China and India following their 2020 border conflict, Vietnam has continued to deepen ties with both nations without alienating either side.

China-Vietnam Relations

The diplomatic relations between Vietnam and China have continued to deepen since 2020. After securing his third term as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Central Committee in 2021, the

late Nguyen Phu Trong paid an **official visit** to Beijing in October 2022. By departing from the tradition of visiting Laos on his first overseas trip after being reelected, Trong signalled Vietnam's recognition of China's importance in its foreign policy calculations. Meanwhile, Trong was also the first foreign leader that Chinese leader Xi Jinping received after Xi secured a third term. The relationship reached another milestone in December 2023 with Xi's state visit to Hanoi. He and Trong agreed to build a Vietnam-China **community with a shared future**. After Trong passed away, his successor (who also temporarily held the position of State President), To Lam, chose to pay a **state visit** to China in his first overseas trip in this role.

Bilateral trade between Vietnam and China exhibited robust growth between **2020** and **2023**, rising from \$133.1 billion to \$172 billion. In 2020, Vietnam's imports from China stood at \$84.2 billion, while exports to China amounted to \$48.9 billion. By 2023, imports from China had increased to \$110.7 billion, and exports had grown to \$61.3 billion. This reaffirmed China's position as Vietnam's leading trade partner, and Vietnam as the former's biggest trade partner in ASEAN.

China's foreign direct investment in Vietnam also showed substantial growth during this period. By the end of **2020**, Chinese enterprises had invested \$18.6 billion in Vietnam across 3,134 projects. This figure increased markedly in **2023**, reaching 4,249 projects with the total registered capital of \$27.1 billion. The

significant expansion contributed to China's improved standing amongst Vietnam's foreign investors, advancing from the seventh to the sixth-largest source of investment in the country.

Despite ongoing disputes in the South China Sea, Vietnam has maintained practical security cooperation with China. The two countries have conducted **joint patrols** along their shared 1,450 km border since 2017. This cooperation extended to maritime domains, with the Vietnam Coast Guard and China Coast Guard conducting biannual **joint patrols** near the demarcation line in the Gulf of Tonkin since 2020.

India-Vietnam Relations

High-level diplomatic engagement between Vietnam and India has maintained a strong momentum since 2020. The Chairperson of National Assembly Vuong Dinh Hue's **official visit** to India in December 2021 strengthened parliamentary cooperation between the two systems. He was the first leader of the thirteenth National Congress in Vietnam to visit New Delhi. Another milestone was reached in July 2024 with Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh made a **state visit** to India, the first of such visit in a decade.

Vietnam-India economic relations, whilst modest in comparison to Vietnam's engagement with China, have shown steady progression. Bilateral trade volume expanded from \$9.7 billion in **2020** to \$14.4 billion in **2023**. This growth has secured India's position as Vietnam's eighth-largest

export destination and tenth-largest import source. While Vietnam has not yet entered the ranks of India's top ten trading partners, the two sides aim to **increase** bilateral trade to \$20 billion in the coming years.

Investment ties between Vietnam and India have shown promising development since 2020, though they remain relatively modest compared to Vietnam's investment relationships with other major partners. By the end of **2020**, India had invested in 293 projects in Vietnam with a total registered capital of \$0.9 billion. By the end of **2023**, the number of projects increased to 389 with \$1 billion in capital. This moved India up from the twenty-sixth to the twenty-fourth largest investor in Vietnam.

Vietnam-India defence cooperation has deepened significantly in recent years. Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh paid an **official visit** to Hanoi in June 2022, when the two sides issued the **Joint Vision Statement** on India-Vietnam Defence Partnership towards 2030. The document aimed to accelerate the finalisation of the \$500 million line of credit that New Delhi extended to Hanoi in 2016, serving dual strategic purposes. First, it supports Vietnam's efforts to diversify its arms suppliers, particularly when purchasing Russian arms has become more difficult following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Second, it advances India's ambitions to develop its defence industry. Vietnamese Defence Minister General Phan Van Giang reciprocated with an **official visit** to India in February 2023.

The relationship reached another historic milestone when India transferred an active-duty missile **corvette** to Vietnam in June 2023—the first time India has gifted such a warship to any nation. The strategic significance of this transfer extended beyond the material acquisition itself. It signalled a deepening of trust between the two nations and underscored India's growing importance as a defence partner in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

By deepening ties with both China and India simultaneously, Vietnam has effectively avoided being drawn into their competition whilst preserving its strategic autonomy. This approach has proven particularly effective in the post-2020 period, as tensions between India and China have risen following their border clash. Furthermore, Vietnam's partnership with China is predominantly focused on economic cooperation, while its partnership with India is centred on defence cooperation. By differentiating partnership priorities, Vietnam has maximised the strategic benefits of its relationships with both powers.

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News Reports

Bilateral relations

Restoration of China-India mutual trust, realization of win-win cooperation meet shared expectations of both peoples:

Chinese FM

Global Times, February 22

Both Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar agreed to work together to accelerate the restoration of exchanges and cooperation at all levels between the two countries, and address their border issues.

Chinese apps return to India, including Shein and Taobao, 5 years after border clash

South China Morning Post, February 13

Chinese apps like Shein and Taobao have re-entered the Indian market after a five-year ban, facilitated by local partnerships and improved China-India relations.

Breaking the Ice: India and China Resume Diplomatic Engagement

Modern Diplomacy, February 2

Following a late January meeting between India's External Affairs Minister and China's Foreign Minister, both nations agreed to resume direct air services and emphasized the need to work together to resolve trade and economic differences.

China and India in the Region

Russia, China foreign ministers discuss relations with U.S., Ukraine

Reuters, February 20

The Chinese Foreign Minister met with his Russian counterpart on the sidelines of the G20 Ministerial meeting in South Africa to discuss topics including future bilateral ties, relations with the US, and the Ukraine issue.

Donald Trump ruffles feathers with mediation offer to ease India-China tension

The Hindu, February 15

Reaffirming its commitment to managing relations with China bilaterally, the Indian government declined US President Donald Trump's offer to mediate the India-China border disputes.

Trump and Modi talk China

Politico Europe, February 13

According to analysts, China's increasingly assertive footprint in the Indo-Pacific was an "underpinning theme" in Modi's state visit to the Trump White House.

India seeks to push pace of defence cooperation with South-east Asia

The Straits Times, February 6

India's growing regional ambitions and its increasingly securitised approach toward Southeast Asia is driving it to supply arms to ASEAN member states.

Trade and Economy

DeepSeek has stoked a rotation out of Indian stocks into Chinese equities—but experts advise caution

CNBC, February 24

DeepSeek's AI breakthrough has fuelled a 26 percent surge in Chinese stocks since January, while Indian equities struggle in correction territory amid a shift in investor sentiment from India to China.

Trump's tariffs present fresh headache for India's slowing economy

Al Jazeera, February 18

President Trump's tariffs on US trading partners, will come at a difficult time for India—which is already grappling with slowing economic growth and weak domestic demand.

Local Government Medical Insurance Funds Sink Into the Red

Caixin Global, February 7

A growing number of Chinese cities, including Beijing and Tianjin, face medical insurance fund deficits due to an aging population and rising healthcare costs.

Economic Survey pegs India's FY26 GDP growth at 6.3-6.8%, domestic growth levers important

The Indian Express, February 1

The 2025 Economic survey projected India's growth rate for the FY 2025-2026 at 6.3 to 6.8 percent, driven by domestic factors, with food inflation expected to ease in the last quarter.

Energy and Environment

Analysis: Clean energy contributed a record 10% of China's GDP in 2024

Carbon Brief, February 19

China's "new three" industries—solar, electric vehicles, and batteries—now contribute over 10 percent of the country's total GDP.

China, India natural gas imports will impact Apac prices: panellists

The Business Times, February 19

India and China are securing long-term pipeline gas deals to lock in large volumes at low prices, reducing their reliance on liquified natural gas imports.

India's natural gas demand set for 60% rise by 2030, supported by upcoming global LNG supply wave

International Energy Agency, February 12

The IEA noted that the "prospect of higher gas demand in India coincides with an expected wave of new global LNG supply. However, it will require careful planning and market coordination to ensure supply security and to help gas compete in a price-sensitive market."

Analyses

Why climate leadership is set for China-India Tango

Observer Research Foundation, February 24

By Aparna Roy, a Fellow and Lead Climate Change and Energy at the Centre for New Economic Diplomacy (CNED)

With the U.S. creating a leadership void, China is positioning itself as a key player in global climate action but lacks the capacity to lead alone, making India a crucial partner in shaping the future of climate governance.

Hope for more rational voices on China within India

Global Times, February 24

By Zhang Jiadong, Director of the Center for South Asian Studies at Fudan University

By embracing a rational perspective and adopting a balanced approach to their complex relationship, India and China can move beyond border disputes, foster strategic mutual trust, and contribute to stability in the global order.

Will Southeast Asia embrace India's defence overtures, despite China's pressure?

Think China, February 19

By Rishi Gupta, Assistant Director, Asia Society Policy Institute, New Delhi

Despite China's strong presence and influence in Southeast Asia, India can strengthen its ties with the region by proactively engaging with ASEAN and establishing closer strategic relations.

How Modi's US visit could add to China's growing list of worries

South China Morning Post, February 8

By C Uday Bhaskar, Director of Society for Policy Studies (SPS)

Enhanced strategic bilateral relations between India and the US, along with India's stronger commitment to the Quad—the security group involving Japan, India, the United States, and Australia—could lead to stronger security initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, heightening China's geostrategic concerns.

Assessing foreign secretary's visit to Beijing: Chinese diplomatic guerilla warfare

The Times of India, February 7

By SD Pradhan, a former chairman of India's Joint Intelligence Committee

While China seeks to downplay the border dispute with India, India believes there can be no normal bilateral relations without resolving the border issue. However, a close analysis of statements from both sides suggests gradual improvements in bilateral ties.

Books and Journals

An Indian perspective on the geopolitics of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Asian Journal of Political Science, January 2025

By K.T. Lalringluanga, a PhD candidate at the Department of Political Science at the School of Social Sciences, Mizoram University, India, and JC Zomuanthanga, an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the School of School of Social Sciences, Mizoram University

This paper examines the role and prospects of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in India's foreign policy, especially in relation to its founders and key members—China, Russia, and the CARs (Central Asian Republics). It analyses the evolution of the SCO as a regional grouping that has expanded in size, scope, and geopolitical influence, and how its member states use it to pursue their respective interests and agendas from a predominantly Indian perspective. Further, the article focuses on the challenges and opportunities that India faces as a young member of the SCO, and how it may balance its relations with a domineering China, and steadfast ally Russia, as well as enhance its strategic connectivity and cooperation with Central Asia. The article concludes with the implications of the SCO's enlargement and diversification for the regional and global order, and how India may aspire to leverage its participation in it to advance its strategic foothold in Eurasia.



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OTHER CAG PUBLICATIONS

- *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)
- *Routledge Handbook of China-India Relations* edited by Kanti Bajpai, Selina Ho and Manjari Chatterjee Miller (Routledge, 2020)



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