

Between Animosity and Pragmatism

By Zorawar Daulet Singh

Rising powers, it is preordained in western geopolitical thought, are condemned to compete. When they happen to be big neighbours, the prospect for animosity is even higher. For the past century and a half, India, and before that British India, and China, and before that Qing China, have obliged western International Relations (IR) theorists. The history of India-China relations could actually be presented as one of a prolonged era of geopolitical discord punctuated only by fleeting moments of mutual understanding and cooperation.

Seen from this vantage point, the unending 2020 border impasse is another chapter in this long saga. The decade of the 2010's was interspersed by intensifying friction and military brinksmanship on the long Himalayan frontier, culminating in the violent clash in June 2020 that killed several Indian and Chinese soldiers. Since then, the political deep freeze in the relationship has only gradually thawed, though not enough for any meaningful dialogue or bilateral contact to ensue. What both leaderships do agree on is that an escalation of military conflict is in neither side's interest and therefore must be



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avoided. Both sides have also muted the rhetoric on their bilateral problems in international institutions or with third countries.

Beyond this, however, there has been little give from Delhi or Beijing. For Delhi, a peaceful and stable border has always been the centerpiece of a steady relationship with China. For China, the border is an important part, but only a part, of a bigger canvas. Since they are unwilling to see eye to eye on the underlying framework for a dialogue, diplomacy has become more of a crosstalk than a serious attempt to break the impasse.

Strangely, both sides find the stalemate—what has been described as a **'new normal'**—to be a low cost way to manage this complex relationship and convert it to their advantage. India has succeeded in

renewing US interest, which had flagged over the last decade, to build a partnership with Washington whose unstated rationale has been to shape the balance of power in Asia. India hopes that its China problem will keep America interested in supporting India's rise and domestic transformation, without Delhi nailing itself to the US mast in the latter's containment policies and military plans in the wider region. For China, an India front that is relatively quiet post the Ladakh crisis and militarily manageable provides breathing room for Beijing to focus on more pressing issues at home and abroad.

But what has really altered the setting and priorities of Indian and Chinese leaders is the onset of a structural great power confrontation between the US and its main adversaries—Russia and China. US-China and US-Russia ties have changed the context for India-China relations. China is busy managing dangerous geopolitical flashpoints in the east and striving for a new, if tenuous, equilibrium with Washington to prevent Sino-American ties from totally falling off the cliff. India too is preoccupied with domestic stability and growth, along with discovering new opportunities from the outbreak of multipolarity since the Ukraine war.

The India-China question, as a consequence, has become a sideshow and peripheral to the near existential struggle between the big powers over the nature of world order. Ironically, India and China

find themselves in several multilateral networks and institutions promoting similar ideas, despite their dysfunctional bilateral relationship. The reason is straightforward: while India remains wary of China's growing power, it also believes in shaping a post-unipolar world that increases the voice and space for non-western states who have been on the margins or at the wrong end of established governance institutions and rules. This quest has brought India and China together along with a growing list of countries to not merely safeguard their national development interests but hedge against what is increasingly seen by the Global South as a predatory misuse of West-led institutions and rules.

The trend of the collective West's inability and unwillingness to bear the burden of creating an inclusive financial, investment and trade architecture has been apparent for many years. What neoliberal policymakers in India and China once embraced as sacrosanct US-supplied global public goods—a single reserve currency, Bretton Wood institutions, predictable energy supply chains and commodity exchanges—have unabashedly been converted into geopolitical instruments for Western goals since the Ukraine war.

Farsighted strategists in India and China had accepted the logic of alternate frameworks and institutions more than a decade ago with the outbreak of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. That investment is now gradually paying off. The BRICS, the SCO, a



common rejection of US-sponsored sanctions against Russia, supporting innovative ideas for development and multilateral norms to benefit the Global South, supporting the idea of a multi-civilisational world order as a normative basis for a post-western dominated world system are all illustrative examples of India and China marching towards a multipolar world order.

These networks are in many ways a return to the old world of inter-connected regions that were severed by the European colonisation of Asia and then further fragmented during the divisions of the Cold War. The BRICS and SCO symbolise a growing multi-civilisational network of nations seeking a predictable and inclusive environment for growth and development. With the West abdicating its role, India and China have positioned themselves as system stabilisers. Nothing perhaps exemplifies this

pragmatism more than India's recent decision to pay for **Russian oil imports through the yuan**, a development unthinkable before the US weaponisation of the global financial system.

Competitive but Peaceful Co-Existence

At the closing stages of the Cold War in the late 1980s, India and China found an opportunity to chart a fresh course in their relationship. Yet, few remember that this *modus vivendi* was decidedly modest. It was devoid of any substance on the resolution of the border dispute, other than keeping the frontier peaceful. Nor was there a common understanding on regional security. In fact, the whole basis of the rapprochement was that Indian and Chinese leaders agreed to disagree on their differences but kept the door open to the development of ties in new spheres like trade and societal engagement.

While it kept the peace for decades, the elephant in the room became larger and larger. Geopolitics became the centre point in the past decade as China's rapid rise and India's insecurity fueled historical fears and a dynamic where each side sought to advance its security at the expense of the other: a classic security dilemma. A series of military crises on the Himalayan border—ranging from innocuous incidents to more virulent standoffs to even a violent clash in 2020—transformed the relationship.

In the absence of any conviction in Delhi and Beijing to truly seek a geopolitical accommodation—neither side is willing to make the concessions necessary for improving ties—Indian and Chinese policymakers need to accept this 'new normal.' Their competition will not disappear. Each side will continue to seek advantages from their global and regional partnerships, as they have done for decades since the 1950s.

At the same time, certain fundamental characteristics of the configuration of world politics will place guardrails on the bilateral relationship.

For one, India and China are not engaged in an existential contest for the normative foundation for a future world order. Ironically, they agree on more ideas on world order than western commentators have led us to believe. Neither do these countries pose an ideological threat to each other. **Indian democracy** that embraces international diversity has nothing in

common with the crusading universalist Western version. Chinese Marxism has been transformed into a complex political-cultural-nationalist amalgam that is now impossible to revolutionise as a global ideology.

India's border dispute, and regional differences with China, pale in comparison to the immensity of the structural competition between the US and China. Both Washington and Delhi face a China challenge that is incomparable and impossible to overcome without strong mutual coordination—something that will likely prove difficult to achieve. India is locked in a continental security dilemma on the Himalayan frontiers that makes it an integral part of Eurasian geopolitics. The US is locked in a maritime security dilemma in the Western Pacific and East Asia that has no logical geopolitical role for India. Indian participation in the Sino-American strategic competition can do little to solve its China problem and more likely make it substantially more costly for India to pursue its geopolitical and geo-economic goals and interests. And since its core interests lie in the Western Pacific, the US is even less inclined to tread on the Eurasian landmass to underwrite Indian security. Most farsighted Indians understand this framework of geopolitics.

The India-China problem is one of power and proximity as well as an extraordinary degree of mutual ignorance and even disdain of the other. The roots of this

phenomenon run deep into India's colonial past and China's 'century of humiliation.' Both those traumatic experiences left Chinese and Indians with an image of the other that has been difficult to transcend with a more sophisticated prism. This is the real failure of Indian and Chinese leaders over the past century. Yet, this is still not a foundation for a Cold War or a great rivalry of the twenty-first century.

As responsible rising powers, India and China can now realistically grasp at the prospect of returning their national societies to **a position they had both held for eighteen of the past twenty centuries— as leading economic and cultural centres.** A multipolar, multi-civilisational world order that is not anchored in the collective West's discredited neoliberal globalist ideology is the basis for pragmatic cooperation between India and China. This also means a competitive but peaceful co-existence between Asia's largest and oldest civilizations.

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