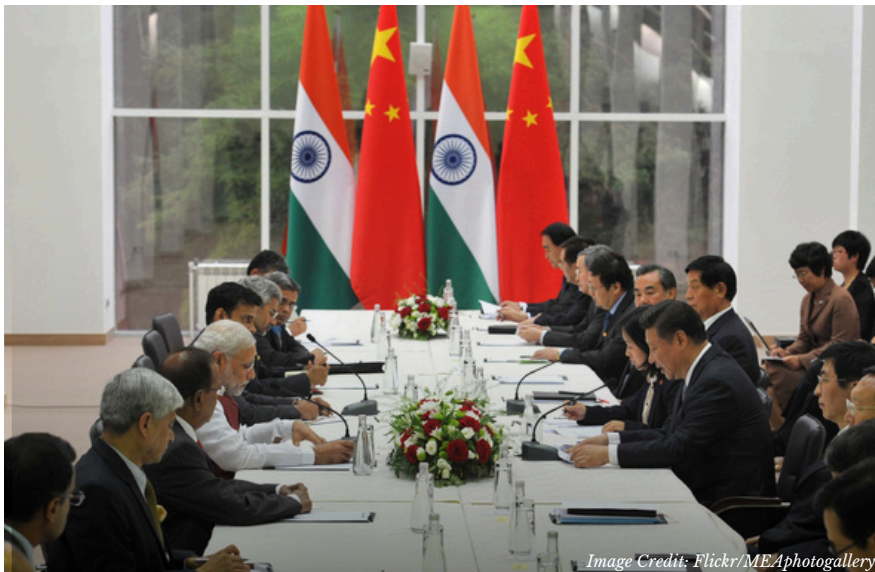


# China-India Brief

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 Lee Kuan Yew  
School of Public Policy

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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.

*Guest Column*

## Sino-Indian Double Rivalry in the Shadow of Trump's Return

By Feng Zhang

Donald Trump's return to the American presidency marks a new and potentially highly unsettling chapter in global politics. How might it affect the increasingly complex relationship between India and China?

The past decade has witnessed a steady deterioration in India-China relations, characterised by deepening **mistrust and misperception**. Two conflicts along the disputed border—the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash—have severely destabilised the relationship. The Galwan incident, which claimed

Centre on Asia and Globalisation

[cag@nus.edu.sg](mailto:cag@nus.edu.sg)

469A Bukit Timah Road, Tower Block 10,

Singapore 259770

<https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/cag>

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the first combat fatalities between Indian and Chinese troops in forty-five years, has pushed bilateral relations to their lowest point since the 1962 border war.

A breakthrough emerged in October 2024, when, after four years of negotiations, the two countries reached an **agreement** on patrolling rights in the Depsang and Demchok regions of eastern Ladakh, paving the way for mutual troop withdrawal. Yet, this achievement represents more of a tactical adjustment than a strategic shift.

As Kanti Bajpai **points out**, several factors converged to facilitate this disengagement: the military stalemate in eastern Ladakh, India's renewed economic interest in Chinese trade and investment, and China's desire to stabilise relations while managing tensions in East Asia. Beijing may have also used this disengagement to signal to Washington that its anti-China **"lattice-work"** alliance strategy was faltering. Another key factor was the BRICS summit in October. The summit provided a diplomatic opening, with the prospect of a bilateral meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping, which helped catalyse the push for an agreement.

Nevertheless, the deal's tactical nature becomes evident in the unchanged positions from both sides on border disputes. China has shown no signs of softening its territorial stance, while India **maintains** that border tranquillity is a prerequisite for broader bilateral improvement. Both sides have continued to

**construct** strategic border settlements —“guardian villages”—to reinforce their territorial claims. The success of the agreement in restoring the *status quo ante* will hinge on the careful implementation of patrolling and monitoring protocols.

The United States has also played a crucial role in encouraging India and China to reach a deal. Growing friction between New Delhi and Washington over India's domestic policies had created fissures in their relationship, while Beijing saw this as an opportunity to distance India from American-led security arrangements in Asia, particularly the Quad grouping. However, to understand how Trump's second presidency will reshape these dynamics requires examining the deeper foundations of Sino-Indian relations.

China's view of India has evolved through four distinct **phases**. Under Mao Zedong, India transitioned from being seen as a “friend” to a “rival.” Deng Xiao Ping later sought to rekindle ties with a renewed emphasis on friendship. This was followed by the “partnership” vision of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Finally, under the current leadership of Xi Jinping, current ambivalent stance of balancing between partnership and rivalry. In his most recent meeting with Modi on October 23, Xi **remarked** that China and India “should become cooperative partners rather than competitive rivals.”

India's perception of the rivalrous nature of the Sino-Indian relationship is much stronger than China's. Modi has adopted an

assertive approach to China by bolstering India's economic and military capabilities. However, this assertiveness does not signify a wholesale shift toward confrontation. India's diplomatic heritage of nonalignment—now redefined as “multi-alignment” or “strategic autonomy”—demands constructive engagement with China alongside other major powers. Nevertheless, Modi's twin ambitions of preserving India's pre-eminence in South Asia and securing great power status in the Indo-Pacific will likely **clash** with Beijing's perceived quest for regional dominance.

This clash of interests reveals a deeper and potentially more destabilising dimension of India-China rivalry. Some scholars call it a “**positional rivalry**” for leadership in Asia—one that extends beyond India's traditional sphere of influence in South Asia to encompass Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region. This is essentially a contest over status. It is distinct from “spatial rivalry” over territorial disputes, but potentially just as intractable. Status competition is a **perennial** feature of **world politics**. It is hard to resolve due to its **relative** and frequently zero-sum nature.

This positional rivalry carries the risk of escalation should it become entangled with two other critical tensions: the enduring India-Pakistan conflict and the intensifying US-China competition. The fusion with the US-China rivalry will become more likely if New Delhi forges a closer alignment with Washington. This has already become entangled with the India-Pakistan rivalry and may further intensify if Beijing

increases its support for Islamabad in its conflict with New Delhi.

The perception of status competition as a manifestation of positional rivalry is much more acute in India than in China. India has long given China its due as a major power. China, on the other hand, often dismisses the notion of India as a peer, and may not even perceive itself to be in a status competition with India. This **perceptual mismatch** does not make it easier to manage the relationship. Beijing's relative indifference, rather than calming tensions, often registers in New Delhi as a calculated slight to India's standing, while Indian assertions of parity are frequently interpreted in Beijing as unwarranted hostility.

The India-China relationship thus stands at a crossroads between rivalry and partnership. Rivalry, like friendship, exists on a spectrum. Reducing rivalry, building trust, and transforming the relationship into one of friendship remains possible, but will require extraordinary political will and diplomatic finesse from both sides. Economic interdependence may help this shift, but only within **limits**.

The balance between rivalry and friendship in the India-China relationship provides a useful lens to assess the impact of the second Trump administration. In what ways and to what degree might Trump's foreign policy affect this balance?

Three scenarios are possible. If Trump further intertwines the US-China rivalry with the India-China rivalry, tensions between New Delhi and Beijing will likely escalate. This could occur if India assumes a more prominent role in a US-led anti-China coalition, whether driven by American pressure or its own calculation that a closer alignment with Washington advances its territorial and status interests.

Conversely, if Trump disentangles the US-China rivalry from the India-China rivalry, and if India and China make progress in addressing their territorial disputes and status concerns, their relationship may improve in meaningful ways. Such a scenario might unfold if Washington's aggressive posture prompts New Delhi to assert greater strategic independence, while simultaneously compelling Beijing to seek accommodation with India.

A third scenario may yet emerge: Trump's presidency could prove peripheral to the fundamental dynamics of Sino-Indian relations. This outcome becomes more likely if New Delhi and Beijing choose to navigate their relationship based on bilateral imperatives rather than external pressures. Indeed, across all potential scenarios, the decisive agency in charting the relationship's course ultimately resides with New Delhi and Beijing, not Washington.

**Feng Zhang is a Visiting Scholar at Yale Law School's Paul Tsai China Center. He has previously taught at Tsinghua University, Murdoch University, and the Australian National University.**