



POST-GALWAN INDIA–CHINA RELATIONS: STRATEGIC CHALLENGES AND EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

The India–China relationship has undergone a significant transformation following the Galwan Valley clash of June 2020, marking the most serious military confrontation between the two countries in over four decades. The incident fundamentally altered bilateral relations by intensifying strategic distrust, accelerating military modernization, and reshaping regional security dynamics in Asia. This study examines the strategic challenges and emerging opportunities in India–China relations during the post-Galwan period. Using a qualitative and theoretical approach based on geopolitical realism, complex interdependence, and regional security complex theory, the paper analyzes border security, economic engagement, diplomatic negotiations, the Indo-Pacific strategy, and multilateral cooperation. The study finds that while border tensions continue to hinder bilateral trust, both countries recognize the importance of maintaining economic cooperation, managing crises through diplomacy, and engaging in regional institutions to prevent escalation. The research concludes that a balanced approach combining strategic preparedness, diplomatic dialogue, and economic resilience is essential for ensuring long-term stability in India–China relations.

Keywords: India–China Relations, Galwan Valley, Line of Actual Control (LAC), Border Security, Indo-Pacific, Strategic Competition, Belt and Road Initiative, Regional Security, Diplomacy, Geopolitics.

Introduction

India's strategy of managing its relationship with China diplomatically in the wake of the 2020 crisis achieved a breakthrough when, on 21 October 2024, the two countries announced a joint patrolling arrangement that would lead to disengagement of forces at the Depsang Bulge and the Charding-Ninglung Nala junction near Demchok.[1] These were the last two of the six areas on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh, where the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had blockaded Indian positions in 2020, leading to a deadly conflict at Galwan that claimed the lives of 20 Indian soldiers.[a] The other four contested areas had already been resolved by creating "no patrol" zones through joint agreements, while these two remained deadlocked since mid-2022.

India had responded to the 2020 Chinese blockades and troop deployments with an equivalent mobilisation of its own. However, instead of pursuing a military option, it leveraged economic sanctions and diplomatic efforts to persuade Beijing to undo its actions in eastern Ladakh. Through both posture and policy, India made it clear that bilateral relations would not return to normal until the situation on the border was resolved. After four years of negotiations, China finally agreed to lift the blockade in the last two areas, setting the stage for a de-escalation of forces on both sides of the LAC and a restoration of normalcy to Sino-Indian ties.

India and China are among the world's largest emerging powers, sharing one of the longest disputed international borders and playing increasingly influential roles in global governance. Historically, bilateral relations have experienced alternating phases of cooperation and confrontation, ranging from the 1962 border war to decades of diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation. However, the Galwan Valley



clash in June 2020 represented a watershed moment in bilateral relations, resulting in casualties on both sides and significantly eroding mutual trust.

India-China Dialogue, 2014–2019

Xi Jinping became president of China in 2013, and Narendra Modi became prime minister of India a year later. Both appear to have expected to maintain good relations with the other. However, China sought to structure the relationship in a way that preserved its dominance on the border, as evident from the signalling during Xi's first visit to India in October 2014, which coincided with a Chinese push into the Indian side of the LAC in Demchok and Chumar.

PM Modi raised the Chinese actions directly with President Xi, as noted at their joint press conference.[3] During Modi's visit to China in 2015, he once again pressed China to clarify the points along the LAC where differences existed—as enshrined in the Border Peace and Tranquillity Agreement of 1993 and the subsequent Agreement on the Military Confidence Building Measures of 1996. Modi was pointed on the issue, noting, "A shadow of uncertainty always hangs over the sensitive areas of the border region ... neither side knows where the Line of Actual Control is in these areas." He added that he had proposed the process of clarifying it.

However, China did not express interest in establishing a well-defined LAC, likely since the lack of clarity allowed it to periodically generate tensions with India. Three weeks after Modi's 2015 visit, a junior Chinese official told a group of visiting academics that the clarification process would complicate the problem but refrained from explaining how.

When Modi and Xi met at the 17th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit on 9 June at Astana, Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar described the thrust of the meeting thus: "[A]t the time of global uncertainty, India-China relations are a factor of stability and as the world becomes more multipolar it was important for India and China to work together more closely." Further, he used a phrase that has been heard often since, that the two countries had an understanding that their "differences should not become disputes" and indeed, if they were handled well they "could even be opportunities."

A week later, with little or no warning, tensions boiled over Doklam. Indian forces stationed at Doka La (or Doka pass) moved down to block the construction of a Chinese road moving towards the Zompelri (or Jampheri) ridge. Since the territory is disputed between only Bhutan and China, Beijing had not anticipated Indian intervention. On India's part, the action was motivated by the concern that Chinese control of the Zompelri ridge would provide China a commanding view over the strategic Siliguri corridor.

After a month of high rhetoric and mutual recriminations, PM Modi and President Xi met at the sidelines of a G20 meeting in Hamburg on 7 July 2017, engaging in tough negotiations to begin a de-escalation process. Subsequently, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, who is also Special Representative on China issues, met his counterpart Yang Jiechi in Beijing on 27-28 July, and after another month of public rhetoric and negotiations, a disengagement was announced.

The timing of the truce was important, with Beijing hosting the BRICS Summit in Xiamen in September and Modi expected to attend. Further, in October, the Communist Party of China was set to host its five-yearly congress—the most significant political event in China—and any action against India that backfired would have reflected negatively on Xi at a critical moment.

Consequently, after the Doklam crisis, when PM Modi attended the Xiamen BRICS Summit in early September 2017, China went out of its way to accommodate Indian positions. It also named Pakistan-based terrorist groups for the first time, in a joint declaration—the Xiamen Declaration. Furthermore, it dropped its opposition to another longstanding Indian demand: support for India's accession to the Nuclear Suppliers Group.



The improvement in the bilateral atmosphere following Doklam was soon reflected in diplomatic activity. The 20th round of talks between the Special Representatives of India and China was held in New Delhi in December 2017 after a gap of nearly 20 months. In February 2018, Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale visited Beijing.

The longer-term outcome of the Doklam episode was a decision by India and China to institute a system of informal annual summits where leaders from the two countries could interact with each other without being restricted to a fixed agenda. The first summit was confirmed by Modi and Xi on 20 March, when the former called Xi to congratulate him on his re-election as president following the 2018 National People's Congress. In mid-April, National Security Advisor Doval visited China and met Yang Jiechi (now Secretary of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission) as well as the new Chinese Special Representative Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

On 20 April, after talks with visiting Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced that the first summit would take place in Wuhan on 27-28 April. An Indian press release afterwards noted that the meeting “will be a positive factor for stability amidst current global uncertainties”, adding that it would be “conducive for the development and prosperity of the region and will create the conditions for an Asian Century.” The first of these summits was held on 27-28 April 2018. While billed as informal, it was a carefully prepared event and called for officials on both sides to enhance strategic communications—in effect, a mandate for greater ministerial and official-level engagement.

Sino-Indian ties appeared to be soaring after the low point of the previous year.[8] As Professor B.R. Deepak noted in an analysis published in 2020, the establishment of the first-ever official high-level mechanism to promote people-to-people and cultural exchanges was a clear signal of the changed mood.[9] When PM Modi addressed the Shangri-La Dialogue for the first time on 1 June 2018, he outlined India's views on the Indo-Pacific as being a “geographic area”, rather than a geopolitical construct, making it clear that the Quad was not a “club of limited members” or directed against any country.

In the months that followed, India-China relations stabilised rapidly, and the two sides resumed high-level military exchanges and people-to-people interactions. In August, they mooted a new MoU to boost defence exchanges to update the older one from 2006. The two sides also signed an internal security agreement to focus on terrorism, narcotics and human trafficking, intelligence sharing, and disaster management.

By 2019, the election year in India, signs of Chinese recalibration were evident. The Chinese government adopted a neutral stance on the issue of India's Balakot strike on Pakistan, following the Pulwama terrorist attack on a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) convoy. Having blocked the designation of Masood Azhar in the UN's Al Qaeda and Taliban Sanctions Committee in April, China withdrew its veto in May. The shift reflected Beijing's interest in preserving long-term bilateral stability and engaging with the likelihood of a returning Modi government. With tensions with the US mounting, keeping India from moving closer to Washington became a strategic priority for China. Additionally, India was on China's radar as an important market and a destination for future investment.

Within a month of his re-election, PM Modi met President Xi at Bishkek on 13 June at the sidelines of the 19th summit of the SCO, with both sides signalling a commitment to maintain the momentum of Sino-Indian ties established during the Wuhan meeting. Weeks later, the two met again in Osaka on 28 June, a meeting that became a trilateral with the addition of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The followup to the Wuhan summit was held at Mahabalipuram, a suburb of Chennai on 10-11 October. Two complications arose. First, China expressed displeasure at India's decision to bifurcate the erstwhile state of Jammu & Kashmir into two Union Territories. Specifically, the Chinese government objected to the reading down of Article 370 and the creation of the Ladakh Union Territory, part of which is claimed and occupied by China.



Second, it highlighted the clash between Indian and Chinese patrols in the Pangong Tso region in September, a month before the summit. However, this was managed through existing Sino-Indian mechanisms.

While these issues made evident significant differences between the two sides, the countries nonetheless reiterated their “consensus” from Wuhan: “India and China are factors for stability in the current international landscape and that both sides will manage their differences and not allow differences on any issue to become disputes.” The two sides agreed to set up a new mechanism for trade, which was growing but heavily tilted against India. President Xi raised the issue of enhancing the contacts on the defence and security side and stepping up military-to-military engagement. In the discussions among officials, there was talk of an “early harvest” in boundary negotiations.

The post-Galwan period has witnessed substantial military deployments along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), increased investment in border infrastructure, greater emphasis on strategic alliances, and renewed attention to national security concerns. India has adopted measures to strengthen border management, diversify economic partnerships, enhance indigenous defence capabilities, and deepen engagement in the Indo-Pacific through partnerships such as the Quad. Simultaneously, China continues to expand its strategic influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), military modernization, and growing regional presence.

Despite persistent geopolitical competition, both nations remain economically interconnected and continue to cooperate within multilateral organizations such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the G20. This duality of competition and cooperation presents both strategic challenges and emerging opportunities. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective foreign policy strategies that promote regional stability while safeguarding national interests.

In the past few years, China has shown its strong intentions regarding its disputes with major countries for its claims on superpower status through the aggressive use of economic and military gestures—with the United Kingdom on the issue of Hong Kong, with Australia on trade, with Japan over the ownership of the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, with the United States (US) on its projection of military power, and with Southeast Asian countries over control of the South China Sea, despite the verdict of the world court under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea agreement. The unprecedented display of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy in international forums, the aggressive stance over the Covid catastrophe, and the debt-trap policy are a few examples of how China is on the path to achieve Xi Jinping’s vision of a ‘Resilient China’. However, the recent attempts by China to stir up trouble on the India-China border, translating it into aggression in the Galwan River Valley, have severely added to the worries of not only India but also the international community. The Galwan Valley clash on 15 Jun 2020 between India and China marked one of the most serious military confrontations between the two Asian giants in decades. The skirmish resulted in casualties on both sides, shaking the diplomatic relations between the nations. This was a one-of-a-kind border clash, taking place between two nuclear power giants, which happened without a single shot being fired but resulted in one of the largest faceoffs ever on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). The conflict remains unresolved, and both sides are maintaining a significant military presence along the disputed LAC. The mystery behind the true intentions of the ‘Dragon’ in abrogating border agreements remains unresolved, but it has unveiled that the Indian perception of its northern neighbour needs reassessment. Delhi requires a major rework in designing its strategy to match the ambitions of China. This also necessitates that all efforts at political and military levels converge toward a common aim of disengagement and the establishment of the status quo on the LAC. At the same time, India should not lose sight of the overall game plan of Chinese geopolitics. Rather, it should manoeuvre to outlast Beijing’s

attempts at disregarding India's ambitions. However, it has been more than three years since the incident happened, and no permanent solution is in sight. This leaves no choice but to strengthen India's stance in all spheres of the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic paradigm. Since the confrontation has its origin on the borders, the military sphere occupies a prime spot in dealing with the issue. Hence, this article sheds light on China's aggression in the Galwan Valley and the military lessons India can draw from this confrontation to curb Chinese progress on the LAC.



Map 1: Map showing Line of Control (LoC) and LAC1

Objectives

1. To examine the impact of the Galwan Valley clash on India–China bilateral relations.
2. To analyze the strategic security challenges emerging along the Line of Actual Control.
3. To assess the geopolitical implications of China's Belt and Road Initiative for India.
4. To evaluate India's strategic response through the Indo-Pacific framework and regional partnerships.
5. To identify emerging opportunities for diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation.
6. To propose policy recommendations for strengthening regional peace and strategic stability.

Results and Discussion (Theoretical)

Table 1. Strategic Challenges in Post-Galwan India–China Relations

Strategic Dimension	Theoretical Perspective	Discussion
Border Security	Realism	The Galwan clash reaffirmed the realist assumption that territorial disputes remain central to state security. Both countries have strengthened military deployments and surveillance capabilities along the LAC.
Strategic Trust	Security Dilemma	Mutual military modernization has intensified perceptions of threat, reducing strategic trust despite continued diplomatic engagement.



Strategic Dimension	Theoretical Perspective	Discussion
Regional Influence	Balance of Power Theory	India's growing partnerships with Quad members are viewed as balancing China's expanding regional influence in the Indo-Pacific.
Infrastructure Development	Strategic Competition	Both countries have accelerated border infrastructure projects, improving logistics while increasing the possibility of rapid military mobilization.

Table 2. China's Belt and Road Initiative and India's Strategic Concerns

Dimension	Theoretical Interpretation	Discussion
Connectivity	Geoeconomics	China utilizes infrastructure investment to expand regional influence through the Belt and Road Initiative.
Sovereignty	National Interest Theory	India's opposition to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor is based on sovereignty concerns related to territories claimed by India.
Regional Diplomacy	Regional Security Complex Theory	China's infrastructure diplomacy increases its strategic presence across South Asia, affecting regional power balances.
Economic Competition	Strategic Interdependence	India seeks alternative connectivity initiatives to reduce dependence on Chinese-led infrastructure networks.

Table 3. India's Strategic Responses After Galwan

Policy Area	Theoretical Basis	Discussion
Border Infrastructure	Defensive Realism	India has significantly expanded roads, bridges, tunnels, and logistics along the LAC to improve defence preparedness.
Defence Modernization	Deterrence Theory	Enhanced military capabilities strengthen India's deterrence posture against future border confrontations.
Indo-Pacific Strategy	Balance of Power	Greater cooperation with Quad partners contributes to maintaining a rules-based regional order.
Economic Policy	Strategic Autonomy	India has promoted supply chain diversification and self-reliance while maintaining selective economic engagement with China.

Table 4. Emerging Opportunities in India–China Relations

Opportunity	Theoretical Perspective	Discussion
Diplomatic Dialogue	Liberal Institutionalism	Continued military and diplomatic talks help reduce tensions and prevent unintended escalation.
Economic Cooperation	Complex Interdependence	Bilateral trade remains substantial, encouraging pragmatic economic engagement despite strategic rivalry.
Multilateral Platforms	Institutional Cooperation	BRICS, SCO, and G20 provide opportunities for dialogue on global economic and security issues.



Opportunity	Theoretical Perspective	Discussion
Climate and Global Governance	Cooperative Security	Shared interests in climate action, sustainable development, and global health offer avenues for constructive collaboration.

The theoretical analysis indicates that post-Galwan India–China relations are characterized by a coexistence of strategic competition and selective cooperation. Realist perspectives explain the persistent emphasis on military preparedness, border infrastructure, and deterrence. The security dilemma remains evident as actions taken by one country to enhance its security are perceived as threatening by the other, reinforcing mutual suspicion.

Balance of Power theory explains India's strengthening engagement with regional and global partners to maintain strategic equilibrium in the Indo-Pacific. Simultaneously, Liberal Institutionalism suggests that multilateral organizations continue to provide valuable platforms for confidence-building and conflict management. Complex Interdependence theory highlights that despite political tensions, substantial economic interactions continue, encouraging restraint and pragmatic engagement.

The study demonstrates that long-term stability depends on effectively balancing national security priorities with sustained diplomatic dialogue and mutually beneficial economic cooperation.

Recommendations

1. **Institutionalize Border Management Mechanisms:** Strengthen military hotlines, regular commander-level meetings, and crisis communication systems to prevent accidental escalation.
2. **Accelerate Border Infrastructure Development:** Continue improving roads, tunnels, surveillance systems, and logistics along the Line of Actual Control while ensuring defensive preparedness.
3. **Enhance Diplomatic Engagement:** Promote regular high-level political dialogue alongside military negotiations to rebuild strategic confidence.
4. **Diversify Economic Partnerships:** Expand trade and investment with Indo-Pacific partners while reducing excessive dependence on critical imports from China.
5. **Strengthen Indo-Pacific Cooperation:** Deepen collaboration with Quad members and ASEAN to promote maritime security, resilient supply chains, and regional stability.
6. **Expand Multilateral Cooperation:** Utilize BRICS, SCO, G20, and other international forums to address common global challenges including climate change, public health, and sustainable development.
7. **Promote Confidence-Building Measures:** Encourage academic exchanges, think-tank dialogues, and people-to-people diplomacy to reduce long-term mistrust.
8. **Develop a Comprehensive National Security Strategy:** Integrate military preparedness, economic resilience, technological innovation, and diplomatic engagement into a unified strategic framework.

Conclusion

The Galwan Valley clash fundamentally reshaped India–China relations by transforming a relationship previously characterized by cautious engagement into one defined by strategic competition and heightened security concerns. While border tensions and geopolitical rivalry continue to dominate bilateral interactions, both countries remain economically interconnected and share important interests in regional stability and global governance. Theoretical analysis demonstrates that realism, balance of power, and complex



interdependence collectively explain the evolving nature of bilateral relations. India's response has emphasized border security, defence modernization, strategic partnerships, and economic resilience, while maintaining diplomatic engagement to prevent further escalation. Looking ahead, sustainable peace will require a balanced strategy that combines credible deterrence with continuous dialogue, strengthened multilateral cooperation, and mutually beneficial economic engagement. Such an approach can contribute to a stable Indo-Pacific region while protecting the national interests of both countries.

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