

India and China

A Stubborn Relationship

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India–China relations have always been shaped by contradictory factors, with forces of cooperation limited by competing geopolitical ideas and interests. This complex model of interactions has served both sides reasonably well, and attempts to elevate one mode of interaction as the dominant one have invariably failed. The recent Doklam crisis showed that, despite efforts from both sides to transform the relationship to one of outright rivalry and conflict, the basic framework proved resilient enough to pull back both countries from the brink.

The history of India–China relations has witnessed it all. Nearly every facet of strategic interaction: from learning to coexist after a prolonged period of colonial debilitation, groping for a new framework in a common neighbourhood, colliding at their common frontiers, engaging in ideological competition, and cooperating to reform the fraying United States (US)-led order. This relationship has always been too complex to classify under a single theme. Competition–cooperation–conflict is an often evoked typology underscoring the contradictory nature of the relationship. Deng Xiaoping and Atal Bihari Vajpayee had arrived at a framework for the relationship much before any fashionable typologies came into vogue.

A three-point formula was established during Vajpayee's 1979 China visit after it was proposed by Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua. Both sides agreed to pursue a resolution of the boundary dispute to maintain peace and tranquility during that process, and that there should be no impediment to the development of bilateral relations in various fields. This basic framework was formally enshrined in the 1988 Deng Xiaoping–Rajiv Gandhi summit and, in retrospect, its efficacy stands affirmed even if it did not prescribe the blueprint towards a final rapprochement. The levels of economic and institutional interdependence that we witness today, despite a lagging and persistent territorial dispute, is the consequence of that modest *modus vivendi* in the closing years of the Cold War.

It has been suggested that this framework needs revision. Shankar Menon, for example, argues that “the old *modus vivendi* no longer works ... India has changed, China has changed, and so has the environment in which we operate. Both have grown their definition of their

core interests.” The alternatives to “a new *modus vivendi*—conflict, uncertainty, hostility—are bad for India's transformation.”⁷¹

An Alternative Model

Proceeding from a different perspective in recent years, the Narendra Modi government too has attempted to challenge the traditional framework by espousing an alternative model, one where Sino–Indian differences must be tackled head on before cooperation could ensue more seriously in other areas of overlapping interests (Patranobis 2017). This approach has led Delhi to seek and hold Beijing to account on a host of troublesome issues; ranging from Chinese positions on India's membership in multilateral organisations, such as the Nuclear Suppliers Group, to Pakistan's cross-border terror groups. While intuitively appealing, this posture led both countries to engage in publicised spats, where their differences were showcased to the world. In terms of outcomes, little was attained.

The critique that Delhi seemed more interested in broadcasting its differences with China, rather than creatively and holistically seeking to address them, is also valid. And instructively, Delhi's bold approach was never accompanied by a broader conversation with Beijing to incentivise its leaders to re-evaluate their India and South Asia policies. If Indian policymakers were not fully confident of or did not even intend to pursue a geopolitical understanding with China, what was the purpose of unsettling the old framework that had left the relationship somewhat ambiguous and open-ended?

But, swinging the pendulum the other way, that is, towards an adversarial relationship, has proven unsustainable. The recent Doklam crisis might be seen as a test case that set the limits of how far both sides could realistically tread in their shadow-boxing. Although, at the outbreak of the crisis, both leaderships were already predisposed to perceiving the motives and actions of the other side through images of suspicion, hostility, and insecurity, they ultimately pulled back from the brink.

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Ironically, the main reasons for a peaceful resolution to the stand-off had very little to do with the military balance on their frontiers. Although some observers have alluded to India's deterrent power as an important factor in China's calculus, India's actual military position on the frontiers remains asymmetric and presumes limited skirmishes or intense infantry combat as the probable war-fighting scenario. Any deviation from that scenario—either as intensive vertical escalation in a single sector of the border or a wider horizontal escalation along the entire Line of Actual Control (LAC)—might bring Chinese geographical, logistical and technological advantages into play while simultaneously exposing India's vulnerabilities. It is unlikely that China's strategic restraint was primarily shaped by fear of reprisals or high direct repercussions of a military escalation.

It was the indirect costs and the positive facets of its interactions with India and South Asia that more likely shaped Chinese choices. One important lesson from the crisis is that India and China discovered that they reside in a common neighbourhood, where other actors, albeit weaker and smaller, are also stakeholders in the region's affairs. In this case, it was Bhutan. But the basic dilemma of a common neighbour being caught in Sino-Indian crossfire could be extended across the subcontinent. And, it is in their common neighbourhood that both India and China have been projecting their developmental and geopolitical visions, a process that has also provided agency and options to the smaller actors. Consequently, Beijing and Delhi could not ignore the consequences of a military conflict upsetting their regional policies and relationships.

Multilateral Institutions

Another reason that arguably arrested the path to conflict on the frontiers is the common order-building endeavours that have brought India and China together in recent years. Although non-Western multilateral institutions and networks—such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa)—have perennially been derided for years by

commentators, they might have played a stronger influence in shaping China's calculus. After all, India and China find themselves in these institutions because of a material and ideological convergence.

Unsatisfied with the Bretton Woods approach to development finance or the G7's stranglehold over the levers of global governance, China and India have discovered enduring reasons to promote new institutions that can make up the governance deficit with respect to the developing world, as well as create real bargaining leverage to persuade the West to reform its institutions and beliefs on the world order. Finally, bilateral economic interdependence, although still shallow and asymmetric, might have been sufficient to constrain more hard-line postures from both sides. Indeed, the prospect of growing Chinese investment in India's infrastructure and manufacturing sectors has already expanded the stakeholders and policy influencers on both sides.

This is where the contrast with the 1962 crisis is sharp. In 1962, India and China had no real basis of cooperation or interdependence. The border dispute had been elevated as the sole feature of their relationship, and it was in that arena alone that both sides found themselves locked in an unconstrained zero-sum contest. In 2017, the depth of engagement and overlapping interests were enough for Beijing not only to assign value to its relationship with India, but also to worry about reputational costs in the subcontinent, an area where China seeks to gain prestige and influence.

Preserving the Old Framework

The last several months have seen all the contradictions in the relationship play out: India's opposition towards the Belt

and Road initiative, India's entry into the SCO, the dramatic crisis on the northern frontiers, the acceleration of multilateral cooperation in the BRICS format, and a renewed attempt at balancing economic interdependence by attracting Chinese capital into the Indian economy. Ultimately, the stubbornness and depth of the overall relationship impelled both sides to peacefully terminate the border crisis.

If the idea of a Sino-Indian bonhomie is illusory and outright rivalry unviable, why not then preserve the old framework that enables both sides to engage with each other at their own pace and without disrupting their other privileged relationships? For Indian elites, the US still retains its position as a future strategic benefactor and partner for India's domestic transformation. An Indian accommodation with China is simply not possible within such a world view. For China, its historical link with Pakistan has been significantly strengthened, as has the traditional policy of denying India an exclusive sphere of influence in South Asia. The most realistic arrangement for India-China relations is, therefore, one that enables both sides to manage their contradictions and positive aspects of their interactions, while keeping the door open to a new *modus vivendi* should international circumstances change.

NOTE

- 1 Interview via email with Shiv Shankar Menon, 14 September 2017.

REFERENCE

Patranobis, Sutirtho (2017): "India Committed to Ties but China Needs to Address Problems: S Jaishankar," *Hindustan Times*, 23 March, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/india-committed-to-ties-but-china-needs-to-address-problems-jaishankar/story-ZQtD9ihCPk5x3R7BvAriSL.html>.

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