From Colonial Ambiguities to Contemporary Brinkmanship: The Evolving India-China Rivalry in the Himalayan Frontier

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Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Paper

Purpose—This research paper examines how evolving leadership styles in India and China—shifting from Jiang Zemin's pragmatic stance to Xi Jinping's assertive ideology—reshaped Himalayan relations, highlighting nationalism, populism, and economic ambition.

Methodology—Using Critical Discourse Analysis, this study examines documents to reveal cooperation, competition, and national rejuvenation. Strategic culture theory illuminates how colonial legacies and unresolved borders shape ideology. Drawing on multiple sources, it shows how smaller Himalayan states navigate pressures, risking shifts from collaboration to tension.

Findings—The study finds that under Xi Jinping, China's Himalayan approach, shaped by economic assertiveness and ideological confidence, has pushed India under Modi toward greater vigilance and militarization. Incidents like the 2017 Doklam standoff and 2020 Galwan clash illustrate fraying trust, increasingly overshadowed by present-day nationalism and fears of strategic encirclement.

Practical Implications—The paper highlights that leadership ideologies shape India-China ties, urging caution against assuming steady détente. By acknowledging cyclical rivalry, India can partner with democracies and manage economic reliance on China.

Originality—This study presents a fresh viewpoint on Himalayan geopolitics, analyzing leadership transformations that realign India-China dynamics and reconfigure bilateral relations.

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I. Introduction

The Himalayas have long stood as a monumental backdrop to the historical interplay between South and East Asia, shaping political strategies, cultural exchanges, and territorial ambitions for centuries. Well before the emergence of the modern nation-states of India and China, this mountainous frontier functioned as a zone of fluid sovereignties, mercantile connections, and shifting allegiances. Empires and kingdoms across South Asia, Tibet, and Central Asia regarded these high-altitude passes and valleys as conduits for trade, religion, and diplomacy, rather than as stark boundary lines between sovereign states.[1] Yet, it was the advent of European colonialism—especially the British Empire's gradual ascendancy in the Indian subcontinent—that imposed a new strategic logic on the Himalayas, recasting them as strategic buffers rather than mere cultural contact zones.[2]

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British India's policies toward its northern frontiers were shaped by the anxieties of the "Great Game," the geopolitical rivalry with Tsarist Russia.[3] British administrators and frontier officers viewed the Himalayas not as a simple natural barrier, but as a defensive shield for British India's northern perimeter. The approach was seldom one of neat demarcation; instead, it relied on strategic ambiguity. Maps were repeatedly redrawn, treaties signed and occasionally set aside, and local rulers alternately pressured or persuaded into accepting arrangements that served imperial interests.[4] Such tactics left behind a legacy of contested claims and uncertain borders that would haunt the region well into the postcolonial era.

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Britain's principal aim was not necessarily to define every inch of the frontier, but to maintain a pliable zone of influence that could thwart any potential Russian thrust toward the plains of India. This approach depended on complex treaties and understandings with Himalayan polities. The 1856 Treaty of Thapathali, which ended the Nepal-Tibet War, exemplified how British mediation reshaped local power dynamics and entrenched a frontier order designed to serve British interests. Similar interventions in Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan created a diplomatic ecosystem where the British could manipulate rivalries, shift their frontier lines as needed, and foster dependency among smaller Himalayan states. What appeared pragmatic at the time would later prove problematic, as these arrangements failed to produce clear, enduring boundaries.[5]

As Qing China weakened in the early twentieth century, the British became more assertive in Tibet, culminating in the Simla Convention of 1914. This agreement attempted to establish the McMahon Line as a boundary between British India and Tibet.[6] While British and Tibetan representatives reached an understanding, China did not accept the proposed line. Even so, the British treated the McMahon Line as a de facto frontier in the eastern Himalayas. By endorsing boundaries without unanimous acceptance, British authorities ensured that ambiguities persisted. Scholars have noted how these cartographic and diplomatic maneuvers enshrined uncertainty into the very geography of the region. Such ambiguity would later confront newly independent India and a resurgent China, both determined to reclaim influence over their borderlands after the end of colonialism.

After India's independence in 1947 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Himalayas confronted two states eager to assert sovereignty and national narratives. India inherited much of the British colonial logic, viewing the Himalayas as a strategic shield essential for national security. China, having consolidated its authority and reclaimed territories it considered historically integral—especially Tibet—categorically rejected many colonial-era treaties and boundaries. The Qing dynasty's earlier decline had allowed British India to extend its influence into Tibetan affairs; the PRC, determined to erase what it saw as a century of humiliation, worked to re-establish its sway over Tibet and other peripheral regions.[7]

In the 1950s, a fleeting sense of optimism emerged. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India and Premier Zhou Enlai of China articulated a vision of peaceful coexistence embodied in the Panchsheel principles. Yet beneath diplomatic courtesies lurked unresolved frontier disputes. India insisted on the legitimacy of British-inherited boundaries like the McMahon Line, while China decried these as imperial impositions.[8] The goodwill of the early 1950s gradually eroded as these contradictions festered.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, tensions mounted, culminating in the Sino-Indian War of 1962. China's swift incursions into territories India considered its own shattered the illusion that mutual understanding could stabilize the Himalayan frontier. The war not only redrew the strategic calculations of both nations but also inflicted a lasting psychological scar on India, coloring its perception of China for decades. The notion of a clearly demarcated and peacefully managed Himalayan boundary proved elusive. Instead, an undefined Line of Actual Control (LAC) emerged as a de facto arrangement, one that remained ripe for confrontation.[9]

Subsequent decades did not resolve these. The Cold War era, complicated by the Sino-Soviet split and India's non-aligned stance, was not conducive to amicable settlements. Both sides fortified their positions: China consolidated its hold over Tibet and improved its frontier infrastructure, while India enhanced its defense capabilities and sought external partners to balance Chinese influence. Still, direct conflict remained limited. Diplomatic efforts, though halting, persisted. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, after Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's historic visit to Beijing in 1988, there was cautious optimism. Economic reforms in both countries and shifts in the global order suggested that stability along the Himalayas could serve mutual interests.[10] Under Chinese President Jiang Zemin's pragmatic leadership and Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's diplomatic endeavors, agreements in 1993 and 1996 emphasized "peace and tranquility" and set up mechanisms like the joint working group for boundary discussions.[11]

During this period, the smaller Himalayan states regained strategic significance. Nepal and Bhutan, historically tied to India by treaties and cultural bonds, started to diversify their foreign policy choices. For much of the pre- and early post-independence period, India had effectively treated these states as buffers, preserving their autonomy from external great powers—especially China—in exchange for their loyalty to New Delhi's strategic interests. However, as China's economic might grew dramatically in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Kathmandu and Thimphu found fresh opportunities Chinese investments in infrastructure, energy, and connectivity challenged India's traditional dominance. Both Nepal and Bhutan discovered that the India-China rivalry could be leveraged to secure better terms for themselves, subtly altering the Himalayan strategic landscape.

India's approach to Nepal and Bhutan had its roots in British-era frontier management. The British had often left border areas loosely defined, making local rulers dependent on imperial protection. This pattern continued under independent India, ensuring that Nepal and Bhutan's foreign policies aligned with New Delhi's objectives. But as China presented itself as an economic and diplomatic alternative, these smaller states began recalibrating their alignments. Economic corridors, hydropower projects, and improved connectivity offered by Beijing opened new doors, enabling Nepal and Bhutan to reduce their reliance on India.[12]

By the early 2000s, China's "peaceful rise" narrative and deepening global integration seemingly created a conducive environment for India and China to manage their differences. Bilateral trade soared, cultural exchanges increased, and there was a sense that the India-China relationship could transcend perpetual conflict management. Yet the boundary dispute remained unresolved. Both sides agreed in principle to clarify and delineate the LAC, but progress was minimal. The underlying assumption that time and economic interdependence would naturally lead to a political convergence proved overly optimistic.[13]

Xi Jinping's ascent to the Chinese leadership around 2012 introduced a more assertive approach, one buttressed by China's rapidly growing economic clout and the resultant confidence it brought. Armed with immense financial resources and vast infrastructure projects—including those spilling into the Himalayan region—Beijing found itself less inhibited by past diplomatic niceties and more inclined to pursue territorial adjustments on its own terms.

While India continued to strengthen its economy and fortify its border defenses, it lagged behind China's scale and pace, making it more vulnerable to Beijing's tactics. The Himalayas thus became a testing ground, where China probed the limits of Indian capacity through infrastructure encroachments, military incursions, and diplomatic pressure—an arena where economic heft translated into strategic opportunity.

Incidents like the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan Valley clash underscore the limits of prior confidence-building measures and delivered a shock to India's assumptions. The first combat fatalities along the LAC in decades underscored that "peace and tranquility" was not guaranteed. Beijing's willingness to use force to alter the status quo shattered the comforting notion that incremental trust-building and economic ties would prevent conflict.[14]

This return to an era of heightened tension suggests a cyclical pattern. Colonial-era ambiguity set a stage where no consensus on frontiers was ever fully reached. Post-independence leaders tried to codify arrangements, culminating in a brief period of optimism in the late 1980s and 1990s. Yet, the emergence of a more assertive China under Xi, coupled with shifting regional dynamics and the rising agency of Nepal and Bhutan, has brought the region back to a state of strategic flux reminiscent of earlier times. Only now, the stakes are higher and the geopolitical environment more complex.

India must adapt to this transformed reality. The assumption that time favored an eventual accommodation has proven false. Instead, New Delhi must contend with a China actively rewriting the rules. The region's smaller states, once considered peripheral buffers, now play pivotal roles as they navigate between two giant neighbors. Their internal politics, developmental priorities, and foreign policy choices reverberate through the Himalayas, shaping strategic outcomes. This environment demands that India, China, Nepal, and

Bhutan approach the Himalayas not as a static frontier but as a contested space where influence must be constantly negotiated.

This article aims to trace this historical and geopolitical arc, examining how the Himalayas moved from an era of colonial uncertainty to a Cold War interlude, through post–Cold War rapprochement attempts, and into the current phase of renewed contestation.

This examination challenges the notion that India-China relations had been on a linear path toward improvement. Instead, it reveals cyclical challenges influenced by evolving perceptions of national strength, shifting global alignments, and the intrinsic strategic importance of the Himalayas. The key difference now is that China's capabilities have grown significantly, and its willingness to deploy those capabilities has increased. India's policy tools remain constrained by slower economic growth, domestic political pressures, and a complex web of regional commitments. The Himalayas, once seen as a remote and impassable barrier, today stand as a crucial theater of twenty-first-century geopolitics, where historical legacies and contemporary power politics intersect.

As the region moves deeper into an era of uncertainty and competition, understanding the historical origins of Himalayan disputes—and their contemporary reinvention—is more critical than ever. The persistence of colonial-era ambiguities, the fragility of past confidence-building measures, and the evolving roles of smaller Himalayan states collectively shape a geopolitical landscape that defies static assumptions. The shift from Jiang Zemin's pragmatic outreach—grounded in dialogue and incremental progress—to Xi Jinping's ideological assertiveness has fundamentally altered the strategic calculus. Both the Doklam standoff and Galwan Valley clash underscore how earlier frameworks of engagement have given way to heightened vigilance, strategic competition, and military preparedness.[15] For India, this new phase demands a reassessment of its priorities, as economic considerations, alliance-building, and security imperatives converge to redefine its approach. Stability in the Himalayas now depends on the ability of regional actors to continuously negotiate, adapt, and defend their interests in the face of powerful forces seeking to reshape the frontier.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The relationship between India and China has long been characterized by historical legacies, territorial disputes, and shifting power asymmetries. The Himalayan frontier, once delineated by colonial-era arrangements and strategic ambiguities, has evolved into a critical arena for broader geopolitical rivalries. Scholars have consistently observed that periods of détente and confidence-building measures have often been supplanted by renewed tensions and strategic recalibrations. This paper situates itself at the intersection of several overlapping bodies of literature, including studies on leadership transitions and their impact on foreign policy, strategic culture and its historical foundations, economic disparities influencing diplomatic strategies, and the agency of smaller Himalayan states within the Sino-Indian competition.[16]

Leadership transitions are pivotal moments that can signify potential strategic redirections. The shift from Jiang Zemin's pragmatic diplomacy to Xi Jinping's ideologically

assertive leadership has profound implications for how India perceives and responds to Chinese actions.[17] Early scholarly works often portrayed the India-China relationship in relatively static terms, emphasizing structural factors or immediate crises.[18] However, more contemporary research underscores the significance of individual leaders and their guiding philosophies in shaping foreign policy trajectories.[19] Ashley J. Tellis, for instance, has extensively explored how leadership perceptions and security strategies interact within Asia, particularly in the context of US-China-India strategic triangles. Tellis's analyses highlight how changes in leadership personalities and power balances can either foster cooperation or exacerbate rivalries.[20] Xi Jinping's consolidation of power and ideological direction, particularly with his emphasis on the "Chinese Dream," mark a departure from Jiang Zemin's cautious approach, which was more oriented toward stable external relations and internal economic growth. This leadership shift necessitates a re-evaluation of India's strategic stance, transitioning from incremental engagement to a posture of strategic competition and enhanced military preparedness.

Under Xi, Chinese leaders have leveraged historical grievances and visions of rejuvenation, while India has had to adapt its leadership discourse—from Nehruvian ideals of peaceful coexistence to the Modi government's emphasis on security and strategic autonomy.[21] Such leadership changes can be seen as pivotal moments that redirect historical trajectories and alter negotiation strategies. This perspective aligns with Sumit Ganguly and Kunal Mukherjee's contributions to understanding the evolution of India's strategic thinking. Ganguly's exploration of India's foreign policy underscores the interplay between historical traumas and contemporary strategic choices, whereas Mukherjee highlights how India's self-image as a "status quo power" and a "responsible regional actor" interacts with its acute sensitivity to sovereignty issues. Together, their analyses reinforce the notion that India's response to China's ideological assertiveness is deeply entwined with entrenched strategic cultural narratives rather than being merely reactive.[22]

Lim and R. Mukherjee further enrich this discourse by examining how domestic institutions, political elites, and public opinion contribute to the formation of strategic culture.[23] As China's assertiveness in the Himalayas intensifies, Indian elites invoke historically informed cultural scripts—such as suspicion of external encirclement, pride in postcolonial sovereignty, and the necessity of strategic balancing—to guide policy decisions. Thus, strategic culture theory elucidates how both India and China rely on inherited frameworks, now reinterpreted by contemporary leaders, to navigate a rapidly evolving strategic environment.

Beyond cultural and historical factors, economic transformations have significantly recalibrated the power dynamics between India and China. The literature on economic statecraft, particularly the works of Xuetong Yan illustrates how growing economic capabilities enable states to exert influence through infrastructure investments, trade relations, and economic corridors. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), for example, redefines the Himalayan region not only as a contested frontier but also as a corridor of connectivity and economic integration, albeit often in an asymmetrical manner. In contrast, India's relatively slower economic growth, when compared to China's rapid expansion, compels it to address material power disparities that shape the rules of engagement.[24]

China's capacity to outspend India in infrastructure projects, its willingness to offer more attractive economic deals to Nepal and Bhutan, and its investments in dual-use

connectivity projects frames a narrative of shifting agency within the Himalayas where influence is increasingly exercised through economic statecraft rather than direct coercion. C.K. Colley provides valuable insights into how economic might translates into bargaining advantages, allowing China to test India's resolve without immediate military confrontation.[25]

Tellis discusses India's efforts to deepen partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia—the Quad grouping—as a strategy to counterbalance China's economic and strategic dominance. Economic asymmetries do not yield uniform outcomes; rather, they reshape the diplomatic landscape by compelling states like India to invest in alternative coalitions, regional architectures, and development projects that can enhance their negotiating positions.[26] Integrating critical discourse analysis with strategic culture theory provides a comprehensive framework to examine how evolving narratives and economic strategies shape the geopolitical landscape in the Himalayas.

Incorporating these perspectives allows for a more three-dimensional understanding of the Himalayan frontier. Rather than a static boundary where two giants clash, the region emerges as a dynamic, multi-actor space where smaller states weigh Chinese investment proposals against Indian security guarantees, employ diplomatic finesse to avoid overt dependence on either neighbor, and adjust their policies in response to shifting power dynamics.[27] This theoretical framework thus accommodates not only the interplay of big-power strategic cultures and discourses but also the agency of smaller actors negotiating their own spaces amidst these competing influences.

III. The Era of Diplomatic Rapprochement[28]

In December 1988, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China unveiled a "thaw" in the long-frozen mistrust between the two nations. This bloom, nurtured by the transformative winds of the 1980s, particularly within China, began to melt the estrangement that had lingered since 1962.[29] Delhi policymakers, keenly aware of the Soviet system's weaknesses and the cracks appearing in its iron dome, recognized the moment's significance. Thus, India embarked on a diplomatic odyssey, taking its first step towards a new era of engagement with China. Rajiv Gandhi's speech at Tsinghua University on December 21, 1988, beautifully encapsulated this vision. Gandhi inspired his audience with a call to usher in a new era of India-China relations:

> Together, India and China can overcome our shared historical traumas and harness our mutual strengths. We aspire to build a peaceful, prosperous, and harmonious world order. By embracing our common humanity, we ensure equity and prosperity for all. Let us work hand in hand to achieve lasting peace and cooperation.[30]

This landmark address not only signaled a strategic pivot in bilateral relations but also laid the groundwork for subsequent diplomatic initiatives, including Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's visit to China in September 1993, which furthered the trajectory of enhanced cooperation and mutual understanding between the two nations.

Prime Minister Rao's visit to China made it evidently clear that a true "normalization" of relations between the two countries was underway, driven by the concerted efforts of both governments and the pragmatic vision of Chinese President Jiang Zemin.[31] Rao's

speech at Beijing University underscored this rush for good relations, emphasizing the potential for India and China to shape a harmonious and prosperous future together through mutual respect and cooperation:

> Asia can achieve its full potential if India and China collaborate. By embracing active foreign policies and the wisdom of harmony, we can build a future of strength, happiness, and peaceful coexistence.[32]

Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's speech at Tsinghua University and Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's speech at Beijing University underscore the time-honored friendship between India and China, with both leaders waxing poetic about peace, cooperation, and mutual progress. Gandhi, nostalgically invoking his grandfather Nehru's dreams, champions the Panchsheel principles, blissfully ignoring their spectacular flop during Mao's era. Rao, ever the philosopher, highlights ancient wisdom and historical camaraderie to promote pragmatic solutions and increased collaboration, as if historical goodwill alone could resolve boundary disputes and economic disparities. Both leaders, in their earnest belief in Panchsheel, practically shout their desperation for harmonious relations with China. As for China, its leaders, who are as smart as ever, seem ready to take full advantage of this excitement, hoping to gain trade, military power, and political influence. This diplomatic dance shows the complicated tango of historical memories and practical politics in the relationship between India and China.

However, this normalization entailed not just symbolic gestures but substantial exchanges: this included visits at the highest political levels, regular interactions among officials, and new avenues for commerce, economic cooperation, and joint ventures. Trade flourished, encompassing both general and border exchanges, while cultural and intellectual exchanges continued apace. Crucially, an institutionalized mechanism emerged in the form of the JWG, tasked with implementing confidence-building measures and delineating the LAC along the Himalayan border. Both governments committed to maintaining "peace and tranquility" in these areas, a pledge that held despite their ongoing territorial claims.[33] Jiang Zemin's pragmatic outreach laid a resilient foundation for this era of engagement, navigating the complexities of the 21st century with a focus on stability and mutual growth.

The decade of the 1990s, particularly after 1991, witnessed significant developments in the bilateral relations between the Asian giants, India and China. The roadmap for diplomatic rapprochement was initially laid down by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Deng Xiaoping. However, progress was briefly halted due to domestic issues, such as the Tiananmen Square incident in China in 1989 and Rajiv Gandhi losing the electoral mandate in India's 1989 general election, followed by his assassination. Additionally, India experienced a brief period of coalition governments.

Despite these setbacks, the rapprochement between India and China resumed after 1991 when the Congress Party, led by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, returned to power. Both Jiang Zemin and Narasimha Rao emerged as leaders unexpectedly and under unique circumstances. Jiang rose to prominence after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident with the support of Deng Xiaoping, while Rao, who had been planning to retire and settle in his native village, unexpectedly became Prime Minister.

Jiang Zemin's lack of strong policy ideas became an asset as he adopted the policies of others, aligning with the broader goals set by Deng Xiaoping.[34] In contrast, Narasimha Rao,

often described as a "half-lion,"[35] initiated the liberalization process in India, altering the course of the country's economic history. He distanced himself from the Nehru-Gandhi economic doctrine, which was heavily influenced by Soviet economic models, despite his party not having a full majority in the Lok Sabha. The similarity between these two personalities was their reliance on a pluralistic approach to policy planning, driven by their inability to lead their respective countries alone. Both Jiang and Rao believed in policy consensus, which stemmed from their lack of mass appeal. Jiang was not Mao or Deng, just as Rao did not match the stature of his predecessors like Gandhi and Nehru.

In the early 1990s, the foreign policy objectives of both nations were rooted in the post–Soviet era and the waxing of American hegemony. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the display of American military might during the Gulf War alarmed Chinese policymakers. This convergence of interests led India and China to agree on the importance of addressing broader issues beyond their border disputes, fostering a more comprehensive and cooperative relationship.

3.1 Second Stage of Sino-Indian Relations: Deng's Pragmatic Turn in India Policy

According to China's foreign minister, Deng had three main goals when he assumed power as the supreme leader in 1978: to resolve China's diplomatic isolation following the Cultural Revolution; to handle the "anti-hegemony" conflict; and to enhance relations with neighboring countries to establish a stable atmosphere for economic reforms. China saw both superpowers as dominant but perceived the Soviet Union as the primary threat to its national security.[36]

It was in the early 1990s that one witnessed two significant transformations in China: strategic and domestic. The disintegration of the USSR removed an enormous counterbalance, which had its impact on changing power dynamics worldwide. Strategically, the overhaul was tectonic in its implication for China. At the same time, the domestic consequences of the 1989 crackdown on the democracy movement were deeply felt in terms of political implications for China.[37] Amid all this, China rapidly globalized the economy, changed the economic landscape of the country, and engaged with the world. Such changes demanded a massive recalibration of foreign policy and a more active face on the international diplomatic front, including trying to deescalate tension with India in the face of an ever-growing American influence in South Asia and the Pacific. In this tumultuous geopolitical climate, it was Deng Xiaoping who worked out the concept of "New International Political and Economic Order."[38] It was based on the following pillars:

(a) **Respect for Independence and Territorial Integrity, and Mutual Recognition:** This was in addition to furthering peace, non-aggression, and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries to ensure stable and friendly international relations.

(b) **Opposition to Hegemony and Equality among Nations:** That is to say, China stood in opposition to the dictatorship of a single power determining the rules of the international system.

(c) **Sovereignty and Equality:** China advocated for an international system where each sovereign nation—be they great or small, strong or weak—is accorded equal respect and rights.

(d) **Respecting National Conditions and Seeking Common Ground:** The political, economic, and cultural contexts of each nation calls for respect in seeking commonality, as well as respect for and recognition of the differences between nations.

(e) **The principle of mutually beneficial cooperation and common development:** this principle emphasized collaborative efforts and shared growth, seeking win-win outcomes for all concerned.

There's an irony in the deliberate structuring of these points into groups of five. Deng Xiaoping talked about these values when he met Rajiv Gandhi in Beijing in 1988, though the truth is, in 1962, Mao had effectively thrown these into the dustbin. As Deng said stated in his speech setting out his vision of a new international political and economic order:

> As for a new international political order, I think the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, initiated by China and India, can withstand all tests. These principles, established by Premier Zhou Enlai and Prime Minister Nehru, are very clear and simple. We should take them as norms for international relations. If we want to recommend these principles as a guide to the international community, first of all, we should follow them in our relations with each other and with our other neighbors….

Under Deng's leadership, China unexpectedly embraced ideals of peaceful coexistence and mutual respect, which it had previously disregarded with merciless force. The recent emergence of diplomatic charm was driven more by China's domestic interests rather than genuine goodwill. China recognized the need to maintain peaceful and stable ties with its neighboring countries as it embraced modernization and development.[39] Therefore, the very same ideals believed to be disposable in 1962 became revived as the foundation of India and China's bilateral relationship.[40]

Speaking at an international conference, Kishore Mahbubani, the well-known Singaporean diplomat and president of the United Nations Security Council, once stated, "Geopolitics is a very cruel business. Ideology can be put aside when necessary and brought to the fore if necessary."[41] As has been shown, the China-India diplomatic relationship arguably exemplifies this pragmatic—and sometimes ruthless approach—to international diplomacy, where strategic interests often outweigh ideological commitments.

Concluding with Gandhi's visit to Beijing in 1988, China's second phase of India policy demonstrated a lack of significant alterations in its approach, which was still largely defined by triangular great-power interactions. During this phase, one additional Chinese objective was to foster Pakistan as a strategic partner in order to restrain India's influence in South Asia. However, China became more receptive to resolving Indian concerns when China perceived deteriorations in its relationship with India as an existential danger. Nonetheless, during Deng's term, the strategic techniques used to counteract India's influence consisted mainly of either persuasion or pressure on India.[42]

During this period, New Delhi became increasingly aware that Beijing's embrace of these concepts was not because they were inherently valuable, but because they aligned with China's broader objective of creating a favorable climate for modernization. This strategic flexibility, or rather cunning deceit, adopted by China demonstrated a profound comprehension of realpolitik, where ideals are only instruments to be used or disregarded based on expediency.

However, in this second phase, India was aware of its previous errors and, as a result, Indian diplomats would use a more pragmatic approach in attempting to reconnect with China. This may be seen in the statement made by J.N. Dixit, a distinguished figure in Indian diplomacy: "I was clear in my mind."[43]

3.2 Jiang's Strategic Calculations

Protecting its borders and raising its prominence in the South Asian region were China's primary objectives during the Jiang era. Jiang suggested to the military's top brass in 1993 that, in order to maintain regional security, "we must follow the policy of stabilizing the neighboring countries, making more efforts, eliminating doubts and promoting good neighborhoods and friendship."[44] Chinese efforts to stabilize its borders with Vietnam, India, and the Central Asian republics stemmed from a desire to address vulnerabilities it perceived on its border. Similarly, China started to focus more on re-establishing its reputation, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. It is important to examine Jiang's diplomatic skills after 1990 within the framework of this rearrangement of China's post–Cold War priorities.

The historic visit of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to China in 1988 revived diplomatic ties between the two nations. One of the key milestones of this visit was the establishment of a JWG to address border issues between the two nations. This set a precedent for future policymakers in both countries, highlighting the need for regular political consultations at the highest levels to foster a peaceful environment in Asia. In this context, both China and India expressed satisfaction with the JWG's[45] performance during President R. Venkataraman's visit with Chinese leadership.[46] The second noteworthy aspect of this visit was the implementation of concrete steps to encourage reciprocal confidence-building measures.[47] Despite friendly outreach by Indian political elites, this historic visit was marred by China's nuclear test, which reminded Delhi of Vajpayee's visit to China in 1979.[48] This incident sparked renewed historical suspicion of Chinese aims.

Discussions between secretaries and high-ranking political officials, however, continued unabated. Both the 1991 visit of Li Peng to India and the 1992 visit of Indian defense minister Sharad Pawar to China helped bring about more stability and predictability.[49]

Unfortunately, China's lack of enthusiasm meant that the boundaries problem remained unsolved. According to J.N. Dixit, when he met with his Chinese colleague in early 1992 to address the border problem, Beijing's position did not seem to have been altered.[50] While former prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao tried to probe about the possibility of a border settlement in December 1991, former foreign secretary Shyam Saran notes that former premier Li Peng dodged the question.[51]

By obtaining the "Agreement on the maintenance of Peace and Tranquility in Border areas" in 1993 during the visit of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao to Beijing,[52] the Chinese were able to achieve their goal of maintaining cordial ties with India while keeping India out of the anti–China camp.[53] The 1993 agreement was the fruitful culmination of renewed bilateral engagement, which began with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's historic visit to Beijing in 1988. Mishra, sharing the opinion of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, has written that during this period, the Indian political class believed that the India-China bilateral relationship had truly matured,[54] and that China was serious about addressing

all unresolved questions that remained since 1962. However, in reality, Chinese strategy remained focused on reducing risk, rather than making any fundamental shifts to its core position.

While visiting India in 1996, Jiang engaged in cordial dialogue and cooperative gestures, culminating in signing of the "Confidence Building Measures Agreement" in 1996. Regular communication, the establishment of a hotline between the two nations' border guard headquarters, the exchanges visit of high- and middle-ranking military officers, and the pre-notification of troop movements in the border region are the accomplishments of this agreement.[55] However, the 1993 and 1996 agreements had allowed China to outmaneuver India in terms of geopolitical influence. Jiang's diplomatic acumen, which he honed under Deng, was on full display during this visit.[56] Chinese officials continued to speak about the Asian century while assisting Pakistan's nuclear program and opposing India's position on the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty. The objective was to keep India "neutral" in the midst of global turmoil and to keep it in "check."[57]

In the 1990s, Jiang's diplomatic strategies were effective in taming India, and he really believed that China would be able to take advantage of India's affection for Russia and distaste for the United States. This was the state of relations between India and China until 1998.

3.4 India-China After Pokaran II

The late 1990s and early 2000s—a pivotal period in shaping India-China relations—were characterized by a complex interplay of strategic competition, economic pragmatism, and evolving regional dynamics. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government, under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, assumed office in March 1998, marking a watershed moment in India's domestic and foreign policy. Among the government's earliest and most consequential decisions was the authorization of nuclear tests at Pokhran in May 1998. These tests established India's minimum deterrence and recalibrated its strategic priorities against the backdrop of China's perceived regional hegemony.[58] These nuclear detonations fundamentally altered the regional balance of power and drew sharp reactions from Beijing.

China vehemently condemned India's nuclear tests. Zhu Bangzao, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, criticized the tests as "against international trends":

> The Chinese government is seriously concerned about the nuclear test conducted by India…. India's conducting of nuclear tests runs against international trends and is detrimental to the peace and stability of the South Asian region.[59]

Chinese media amplified this rhetoric, portraying India as a destabilizing force in South Asia.[60] These reactions reflected not only China's immediate concerns over India's nuclearization but also its broader apprehensions about a potential US-aligned India, which could challenge Beijing's regional aspirations. Prime Minister Vajpayee's letter to US President Bill Clinton explicitly cited the "nuclear weapons state on our borders," a reference to China, as a core justification for the tests.[61] This assertion highlighted India's strategic unease over Beijing's support for Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs, exacerbating mistrust between the two nations.[62]

The international response, particularly from the United States, added another dimension to India-China dynamics. Initially, the Clinton administration aligned its stance with

Beijing, emphasizing non-proliferation and leveraging its growing partnership with China. However, this alignment was short-lived. Strategic dialogues between Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh and US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott emphasized India's legitimate security concerns, particularly regarding China's strategic support for Pakistan. By mid–1999, Washington adopted a more neutral position, indirectly pressuring Beijing to recalibrate its approach toward New Delhi.[63]

China's response to India's nuclear tests and subsequent diplomatic maneuvers reflected Jiang Zemin's pragmatic foreign policy. Recognizing the risks of alienating India, Jiang prioritized economic stability and regional engagement over direct confrontation. Beijing resumed border negotiations with India, underscoring its willingness to maintain dialogue despite lingering tensions.[64] The Kargil War of 1999 further tested this dynamic. While Pakistan, China's long-standing ally, escalated hostilities with India, Beijing maintained a neutral stance, signaling its intent to avoid direct involvement in South Asian conflicts. However, Beijing's continued support for Pakistan's nuclear program remained a significant irritant for New Delhi.[65]

3.5 The New Millennia

By mid–2000, China had become acutely aware of its rising position on the global stage, bolstered by its booming economy and increasing geopolitical influence. This period marked China's complete normalization of relations with the Russian Federation, forming a strategic partnership that further solidified its international standing. China's economic growth translated into substantial geopolitical clout, allowing it to assert itself more confidently in global affairs.

In January 2001, Li Peng, chairman of the National People's Congress, visited India, emphasizing that friendly relations between the two countries is a permanent objective of China's foreign policy.[66] Though Li's nine-day goodwill tour affirmed constructive rapprochement between the two countries, Chinese military assistance to Pakistan and soft stance on terrorism remained sources of concern regarding China's underlying intentions. Despite these points of tension, dialogue between two countries persisted, with the JWG continuing discussions on the border issue, followed by Premier Zhu Rongji's visit in 2002.[67]

Another historic visit occurred in June 2003 when Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee toured China. This visit was the culmination of numerous mid- and high-ranking exchanges between policymakers from both countries. The achievements of Vajpayee's visit were significant, resulting in the signing of ten agreements and a landmark declaration on principles for relations and comprehensive cooperation between India and China. This joint declaration was the first of its kind between the two nations, marking a new chapter in bilateral ties.[68]

During Vajpayee's visit, he met with Jiang Zemin, Chairman of the Central Military Commission. As Jiang was considered a bridge between the older generation and a new generation led by Hu Jintao, their meeting highlighted China's stability in its foreign policy towards India, bridging past engagements with future aspirations. Vajpayee's visit also set the stage for enhanced cooperation across domains, with agreements and declarations signing a strong foundation for future diplomatic and economic interactions. This

period marked a pivotal moment in India-China dynamics, showcasing their commitment to overcoming historical tensions and building a more cooperative and stable regional environment.

However, the question of the unresolved borders in the Himalayas is still a challenge for both countries. On this question, China has a superior position because of its economic might and improved strategic relationships with the US and Russia.[69] Seasoned Indian Diplomat Gokhale put it rightly,

> Thus, the normalization of US–China relations and the partnership with Russia meant the reduction of strategic pressure and the return to the balance-of-power situation that China felt comfortable with.[70]

The last meeting of the JWG on the boundary issue between India and China took place in Beijing in 2005. Following this conference, it became evident that the resolution of the boundary issue would be complicated and lengthy.

Between 2004 and 2014, under the UPA-led Congress government, India-China relations were significantly influenced by the interplay of economic pragmatism and growing strategic disparities, which were less prominent in the early 1990s. Reflecting a shared recognition of economic interdependence, both nations expanded trade ties and deepened commercial engagement, even as underlying geopolitical tensions began to surface more prominently. Trade volumes between India and China experienced a remarkable surge, growing from approximately $3 billion in 2000 to $65 billion by 2013, and further escalating to $118 billion by 2024.[71] This rapid growth was emblematic of the pragmatism underpinning their relationship, even as strategic competition persisted. Chinese exports to India were dominated by machinery, electronics, and manufactured goods, while India's exports consisted primarily of raw materials like iron ore, cotton, and organic chemicals. However, this economic engagement revealed structural imbalances, with India's trade deficit ballooning to $85.5 billion by 2024.[72] Indian policymakers frequently raised concerns about restricted access to Chinese markets for its pharmaceuticals and IT products, as well as the dumping of Chinese goods in the Indian market, which hurt domestic industries.

China's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in India further highlighted the pragmatic nature of their economic engagement. By 2024, Chinese investments in Indian startups, particularly in technology and telecommunications, exceeded $2.5 billion.[73] Companies like Xiaomi and Huawei captured substantial market shares in India, strategically using economic tools to deepen Beijing's influence in South Asia. However, these investments were not devoid of strategic calculations. For Beijing, robust trade and investment ties served as buffers against potential confrontations, allowing China to focus on consolidating its regional dominance. Simultaneously, economic engagement with India provided Beijing with leverage, as India's growing dependence on Chinese imports exposed vulnerabilities in its supply chains.

The strategic use of economic diplomacy extended beyond bilateral trade and FDI to regional infrastructure initiatives. The ambitious Trans-Himalayan railway project exemplified China's vision for integrating South Asia into its economic orbit. As part of the BRI, this project proposed rail links connecting Lhasa in Tibet with Kathmandu in Nepal, potentially extending into India.[74] These initiatives aimed to enhance China's economic

footprint, challenge India's traditional dominance in the region, and reinforce Beijing's territorial claims. However, the implementation of such projects faced significant hurdles, including the rugged Himalayan terrain, environmental concerns, and political resistance from neighboring states wary of overdependence on Chinese investments. For India, these initiatives underscored the need for proactive engagement with its smaller neighbors to counterbalance China's growing influence.

India's response to China's economic and strategic maneuvers was shaped by a mix of pragmatism and caution. Recognizing the importance of trade and investment ties with China, India sought to diversify its partnerships to reduce economic dependency. Initiatives like "Make in India" aimed to bolster domestic manufacturing and attract investments from countries other than China. India also deepened its strategic partnerships with the United States, Japan, and the European Union, forming networks that could counterbalance China's economic clout and support India's aspirations for regional influence.

The interplay between economic diplomacy and strategic competition defined this period of India-China relations. Economic engagement created avenues for cooperation, but it also exposed vulnerabilities and deepened mistrust. While China leveraged its economic might to expand its regional influence, India grappled with the challenges posed by a widening trade deficit and the strategic implications of Chinese infrastructure projects. This asymmetry in economic power and strategic priorities ensured that the relationship remained dynamic and multifaceted.

Infrastructure development, particularly in the Himalayan region, further highlighted the strategic underpinnings of China's economic initiatives. The Trans-Himalayan railway project symbolized Beijing's vision for regional integration but faced significant logistical and political challenges. India, viewing these projects with suspicion, interpreted them as part of a broader strategy to encircle it geopolitically. This dynamic underscored the contrasting capabilities of the two nations, with Beijing's ability to finance and execute large-scale projects reinforcing its regional dominance.

However, the transition to China's fourth-generation leadership under Hu Jintao brought a discernible shift in tone and strategy. By 2008, China had surpassed Japan as the world's second-largest economy, emboldening its foreign policy and amplifying its regional ambitions. This newfound confidence manifested in a more assertive stance on territorial disputes, particularly with India. While Jiang had pursued restraint, the post–Jiang leadership viewed India as a rival in Asia's evolving power structure. Border issues, which had been managed with relative calm, re-emerged as flashpoints, signaling a more aggressive Chinese posture that sought to capitalize on perceived gaps in India's political and strategic responses.

This shift underscored the deepening power gap between India and China, which became especially evident after 2000, when China emerged as the comparatively stronger economic and military force. New Delhi, in comparison, lacked comparable economic and military clout, unable to singlehandedly challenge China's regional ambitions. Its reliance on external partnerships—particularly with the United States and Russia—becomes pivotal for balance. Post-1991 Sino-Russian cooperation, driven by pragmatic self-interest, prevents Moscow from backing India over China. This underscores how India's geopolitical posture hinges on an inherently delicate balancing act rather than outright parity. In essence, any sustainable regional stability depends on India's ability to navigate shifting alliances while mitigating Beijing's dominance.

IV. Ideological Assertiveness and Its Impact on India-China Relations

The rise of Xi Jinping within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been characterized by an assertive ideological posture that seeks to restore China's global pre-eminence while simultaneously challenging the influence of liberal democracies such as the United States and India.[75] Under Xi's leadership, "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" has become a central tenet of governance, emphasizing a strong, centralized, and nationalist vision that projects China's power both regionally and globally.[76]

This vision is distinctly at odds with India's political trajectory under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose administration has increasingly embraced an assertive form of Hindu nationalism that not only shapes domestic politics but also informs New Delhi's foreign policy posture toward Beijing.[77] The ideological contrast between Xi's authoritarian nationalism and Modi's Hindutva-driven populism has deepened mutual suspicions, intensifying the geopolitical rivalry in South Asia and beyond.[78]

The simultaneous rise of Donald Trump's populist leadership in the United States created an environment in which ideological affinities between Modi and Trump posed a formidable challenge to China's regional and global ambition.[79] Xi viewed this alignment as part of a broader encirclement strategy aimed at constraining Chinese influence, particularly through mechanisms like the Quad that unite the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia under the banner of protecting a "free and open Indo-Pacific." Against this backdrop, border confrontations, strategic realignments, and competing visions of economic connectivity have come to define the trajectory of India-China relations under Xi's rule.[80] Incidents such as the Doklam standoff in 2017 and the Galwan Valley clashes in 2020 illustrate how Xi's ideological assertiveness intersects with Modi's nationalist rhetoric, producing a dynamic of competitive brinkmanship at the LAC.

China's infrastructure construction near the Bhutan-India-China tri-junction in Doklam was emblematic of Xi's willingness to test India's resolve, especially as Beijing perceived New Delhi's growing ties with Washington as part of a larger attempt to contain China. India's intervention in Doklam, in turn, was fueled by nationalist pressures at home—fanned by a Hindu right-wing ecosystem that demands a muscular foreign policy to counter perceived threats from China and Pakistan.[81] The subsequent Galwan Valley clashes, which resulted in casualties on both sides, underscored the gravity of a border dispute now deeply entwined with each leader's populist and ideological commitment. This nationalist fervor was further intensified by India's deepening defense ties with the US under Trump, including joint military exercises and discussions around advanced defense technologies, which Beijing regarded as a clear attempt at strategic encirclement.[82]

As Xi promotes a vision of a Sino centric regional order predicated on China's historical claims and renewed self-confidence,[83] Modi has sought to galvanize domestic support through a narrative of India's resurgence, exemplified by slogans such as "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (Self-Reliant India). These clashes also highlight the influence of a broader Indo-Pacific strategy shared by India and the US, one that seeks to secure crucial maritime chokepoints, promote freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, and offer strategic alternatives to smaller South Asian and Southeast Asian nations wary of Beijing's growing assertiveness. In Xi's view, such Indo–US cooperation not only represents a challenge

to China's national security but also constitutes an ideological affront to the CCP's vision of socialist governance, particularly when countries like India openly champion democracy, a model which is in stark contrast to China's authoritarian model of governance.

Beyond the military dimension, Xi's ideological assertiveness is also reflected in Beijing's economic diplomacy, most notably through the BRI.[84] The BRI epitomizes China's ambition to create a web of infrastructure and trade routes that solidify its position as a central node in the global economy. India has consistently opposed the BRI for multiple reasons, including concerns about national sovereignty (especially in projects traversing Pakistan-occupied Kashmir), fears of debt traps for smaller countries, and apprehensions about China using infrastructure projects as strategic assets in times of conflict.[85] Xi regards the BRI as a cornerstone of his "Chinese Dream," designed to project power and influence across Asia, Africa, and Europe.[86] India has countered by offering alternative connectivity plans such as the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and has bolstered partnerships with Japan and the US to develop infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific.

The Modi government's opposition to the BRI also resonates with the broader anti–China sentiment domestically, fueled by the rise of Hindu nationalism, which portrays China as a rival civilization that undermines India's territorial integrity and cultural primacy in Asia. Indeed, the populist narratives advanced by BJP-aligned media and politicians frequently frame China as an expansionist power seeking to leverage its economic might to subjugate smaller South Asian countries, thereby rationalizing New Delhi's closer alignment with Washington as a necessary step in preserving regional stability.[87]

The ideological dimension of India-China competition extends deeply into Nepal and Bhutan, two Himalayan states traditionally within India's sphere of influence. Nepal became a flashpoint in 2015 when India imposed an unofficial blockade following Kathmandu's adoption of a new constitution. This blockade, widely criticized for exacerbating humanitarian issues in Nepal, sparked anti–India sentiments and presented Xi with an opening to deepen China's foothold. Beijing swiftly intensified economic and political ties with Kathmandu, incorporating Nepal into the BRI framework and proposing ambitious infrastructural projects such as the Trans-Himalayan railway that would link Tibet to Nepalese territory and potentially extend to India's borders.[88]

Despite New Delhi's recent diplomatic overtures, Nepal remains wary of India's political reach, viewing it as a continued intrusion into domestic governance and sovereignty.[89] This skepticism extends beyond India to include US-sponsored frameworks like the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and the Indo-Pacific strategy, both of which Kathmandu perceives as potential infringements on its autonomy.[90] Consequently, Nepal has signaled a recalibration in its foreign policy by gravitating toward China's infrastructural and strategic propositions, including the Trans-Himalayan railway. This pivot not only challenges India's traditional sphere of influence but also underscores Kathmandu's desire to balance, if not resist, Western-led initiatives, opting instead for partnerships it deems more congruent with its sovereignty and economic ambitions. For Xi, this effort serves multiple ideological and strategic purposes: it showcases China's capability to deliver developmental benefits to its neighbors without the political conditions often associated with Western or Indian aid, while simultaneously eroding India's influence in the Himalayan region.

Similarly, Bhutan, long cautious of Beijing's overtures, has faced persistent Chinese territorial claims, prompting fears in New Delhi that Thimphu may eventually succumb to China's economic inducement. Xi's administration has pushed direct negotiations with Bhutan, bypassing India and challenging New Delhi's long-standing claim to act as the principal security partner for Bhutan. In doing so, Beijing hopes to reshape the Himalayan political landscape to better reflect China's envisioned regional order, wherein India would be forced to accept a diminished strategic role.[91]

Within India, Xi's growing assertiveness has reinforced the narrative that China is orchestrating a grand strategy of encirclement through projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and closer ties with India's neighbors. The threat perception in New Delhi intersects with Hindu nationalism, which envisions India as a civilizational state reclaiming historical primacy in Asia. Though India's constitution safeguards secular, socialist, and democratic principles, Hindu nationalism, described as "neo-fascist" by liberal commentators in India, has an influence that extends beyond the country's domestic borders. Its marginalization of religious minorities and challenges to pluralist ideals contribute to tensions across South Asia, where intertwined histories make neighboring states more susceptible to majoritarian impulses. This approach risks destabilizing the region's delicate mosaic of ethnic and religious diversity, potentially undermining fragile democracies and civil liberties.[92] Modi's government embraces a proactive foreign policy that includes military modernization, a stronger emphasis on maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region, and partnerships with major democracies, including the United States, Japan, and Australia.[93] This development is precisely what Xi's leadership fears: a coordinated democratic front in the Indo-Pacific that not only counters China's strategic space but also challenges the ideological legitimacy of the CCP's governance model.

With Donald Trump's re-election ensuring another term in office, the synergy between populist nationalism in the United States and India has been reinvigorated, posing an even greater challenge to China's regional and global ambitions. Trump's continued emphasis on "America First" dovetails seamlessly with Modi's "Make in India" and "Atmanirbhar Bharat" campaigns, further amplifying anti–China sentiments and policies. Unlike the previous electoral cycle, where leadership changes in Washington introduced policy recalibrations, Trump's political longevity cements a strategic alignment between India and the US that is grounded in shared skepticism toward Beijing's ascendancy—much to Xi's ongoing chagrin.[94]

The interplay of these ideological forces became starkly visible during the Doklam standoff and Galwan clashes, where each side's decision-making calculus was informed not merely by military and diplomatic concerns but also by the imperatives of nationalist legitimacy at home. Xi's carefully cultivated image as a decisive leader who would not compromise on matters of sovereignty required the PLA to adopt a hardline approach along the LAC, even at the risk of escalating tensions.

On the other side, Modi's political base, energized by Hindu nationalism, demanded a strong response to perceived Chinese transgressions, effectively narrowing New Delhi's room for compromise. These incidents underscored the limits of economic interdependence as a mitigating factor in the bilateral relationship, even though China and India have seen bilateral trade volumes surge over the last decade. The asymmetry in trade, coupled with India's significant deficit, has fueled domestic calls for boycotts of Chinese goods,

further politicizing economic ties and prompting the Modi government to seek alternative supply chains and investment.[95] Yet the reality remains that many Indian industries, particularly in the technology and pharmaceutical sectors, rely heavily on Chinese inputs, illustrating the complex dance between competition and dependence that defines India-China economic relations.

Xi Jinping's ideological assertiveness is particularly evident in maritime contexts, where China's pursuit of port projects in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and elsewhere—often described as a "string of pearls"—is interpreted by Indian strategists as a move to limit India's rise to great-power status.[96] Although much of this activity predates Xi, his leadership has accelerated naval modernization and overseas port acquisitions, reflecting his vision of a "strong navy, strong nation" and the broader goal of rejuvenating China.[97]

In response, India has intensified maritime partnerships, conducting joint naval exercises with the United States and other Quad members, and building ties with littoral states such as Mauritius, Seychelles, and Indonesia. These initiatives align with India's Act East policy, designed to strengthen engagement with Southeast Asian nations that share concerns about Beijing's actions in the South China Sea.[98] In turn, Xi's government views India's growing maritime network as evidence of a liberal-democratic coalition aiming to contain China's rise under the banner of a rules-based order. China contests this narrative by promoting its own developmental model, emphasizing efficiency and political stability over what it sees as the "messy pluralism" of democracies.

Ideological competition and strategic calculation similarly drive technology and investment disputes. Chinese companies such as Huawei and Xiaomi, once dominant in India's consumer markets, have faced increasing scrutiny from Indian regulators, largely due to data-security worries and the geopolitical implications of allowing Chinese technology to permeate critical infrastructure. India's subsequent bans on numerous Chinese apps and tougher investment rules reflect how Xi's assertive policies have prompted countermeasures consistent with the nationalist sentiments of Modi's core political base. While these actions can appear protectionist, they are also part of India's broader ideological rift with China, with New Delhi arguing it must protect its digital sovereignty. Xi's commitment to technological self-reliance, exemplified by policies like "Made in China 2025," informs his view that India's clampdown is part of a broader US–led effort to stifle China's tech ambitions.[99]

The ideological camaraderie between Modi and Donald Trump, both populist leaders, further heightened Xi's apprehensions. Although US administrations evolve, Washington's persistent aim of bolstering India's capacity in the Indo-Pacific—through the Quad, defense cooperation, and advanced technology sharing—appears to validate Xi's view of an authoritarian-democratic confrontation. In this context, the China-India rivalry goes beyond a mere border dispute: it reflects a deeper struggle between competing governance models. Hindu nationalism's ascent in India encourages policymakers to interpret the Sino-Indian standoff as a civilizational contest, with a resurgent India challenging a rising China in Asia.[100] This perspective resonates among Indian hardliner Hindu voters who see Hindu nationalism as reinforcing national identity against perceived foreign encroachment.[101]

While Xi's ideological assertiveness occasionally intersects with Modi's nationalist rhetoric, linking it directly and exclusively to the rise of Hindu nationalism oversimplifies two distinct political frameworks. Modi's leadership style—more akin to that of Recep

Tayyip Erdoğan—relies on majoritarian appeals and a strongman persona within a formally democratic structure.[102] By contrast, Xi's agenda is steeped in Communist Party ideology that emphasizes centralized control and an expansive foreign policy vision. In parallel, US administrations have consistently looked to India as a linchpin against China in the Indo-Pacific, compounding Xi's fears of strategic encirclement. Beijing's willingness to advance Belt and Road projects in the face of Indian objections further underscores Xi's commitment to shaping a global order increasingly aligned with authoritarian governance.

The relationship between Xi's China and Modi's India remains mired in unhealthy competition across multiple domains—from contested borders and maritime security to technological and even space endeavors—showing few signs of reconciliation. Nationalist fervor, territorial disagreements, and clashing connectivity initiatives have generated a precarious dynamic, ensuring that these two ideologically divergent powers continue to shape and unsettle Asia's geopolitical landscape in the twenty-first century.

V. Conclusion

The India-China relationship, forged against the backdrop of British-era frontier ambiguities and shaped by multiple phases of diplomatic engagement, has oscillated between cautious rapprochement and renewed conflict. While the colonial legacy left unsettled boundaries and entrenched uncertainties, post-independence leaders attempted to normalize relations through incremental measures, such as the 1993 and 1996 border agreements. Nevertheless, persistent concerns over sovereignty, divergent economic trajectories, and asymmetric military capacities continued to stir mutual suspicions.

The rise of Xi Jinping and the parallel ascent of Hindu nationalism under Narendra Modi have reconfigured this competitive landscape. Xi's assertive "China Dream," anchored in the Belt and Road Initiative and a push for regional hegemony, clashes with India's own vision of reclaiming its civilizational status and safeguarding its Himalayan periphery. Infrastructure projects in contested areas, from Doklam to the Galwan Valley, highlight just how tightly strategic interests, nationalist fervor, and unresolved border claims intersect.

Meanwhile, smaller Himalayan states—Nepal and Bhutan foremost among them—have exploited growing India-China competition to pursue their own economic and political objectives, no longer comfortably situated as Indian buffers. Further complicating the rivalry is Washington's deepening partnership with New Delhi, exemplified by the Quad, and Beijing's simultaneous drive to cultivate alternative global networks.

In essence, the India-China dynamic remains cyclical and layered; the ghosts of colonial cartographies still loom, ideological divergences have intensified, and geopolitical realignments now extend far beyond bilateral boundaries. Although robust trade and occasional diplomatic overtures persist, the interplay of ideological commitments, strategic maneuverings, and historical legacies perpetuate tension. As Xi's China and Modi's India both strive for regional pre-eminence—backed by nationalist rhetoric, global alliances, and economic pursuits—stability in the Himalayas appears contingent on each side's willingness to negotiate amidst a complex web of competing ambitions.

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