



INDIA AND CHINA: ARE GOOD NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS POSSIBLE?

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Stable and peaceful relations between India and China are important for not just our two countries but the entire region and world

*Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in an interview to the Newsweek on
10 April 2024*

*Sound and stable China-India relations serve the interests of both countries and
are conducive to peace and development in the region and beyond*

*Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning responding to
PM Modi's statement. Global Times, 11 April 2024*

Introduction

1. It is widely believed that Buddhism from India travelled to China between 206 BC and 220 AD, during the Chinese Han period. Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian (Fa-Hien) visited India between 399 AD to 412 AD, during the Gupta dynasty. In his memoirs he described that "Indian (Magadh) cities and towns are the greatest of all in the 'middle kingdom'. The inhabitants are rich and prosperous, and vie with one another in the practice of benevolence and righteousness"¹. Another Chinese monk Xuanzang (Hiuen

¹Fa-Hien (Translator: James Legge – Translated in 1875), A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms, by Fa-Hsien (Chapter XXVII, Patliputra or Patna in Magadh).

Tsang) visited India between 629 AD and 645 AD. He also studied in the famed Nalanda University under the Indian Buddhist monk Silabhadra².

2. India's relationship with Tibet can be traced to the 8th Century when Buddhism was introduced in Tibet by two Indian monks. Shantarakshita built the first monastery in Tibet. Thereafter Padmasambhava (known as Guru Riponche in Tibet), became the main proponent of Buddhism in Tibet. Padmasambhava was a professor in Nalanda University, before proceeding to Tibet in 747 AD on the invitation of Thisrong – Detsan, the king in Tibet. The present day Tibetans way of life draws copiously from Indian religious teachings and culture.

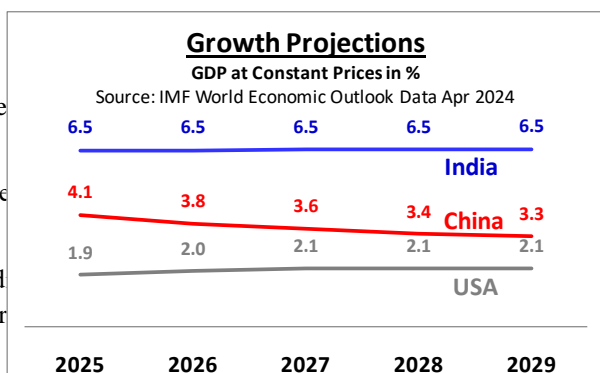
3. During World War II, both British India and China played important roles in halting the progress of Imperial Japan. The modern day relationship between India and China began in 1950 when India was amongst the first few countries to recognize Peoples Republic of China. Relations thereafter have however been characterized by border disputes. The Sino Indian war in 1962 was a watershed event, which overturned the historical cordial relations. Multitude of historical issues on the Indio-Tibet borders with potential for disagreement, combined with **emergent factors like the competitive economic growth needs, China's political outlook, proliferating energy needs of India and China, etc, have accentuated the security dimension of India-China relations**³. While India has certain leverages in the regional politico-security domain, the geo-strategic space has increasingly been dominated by China's politico-economic rise⁴. In the past few decades, fast economic growth appears to have bestowed domineering position to China in the traditional geo-strategic arena.

4. In the present times, however, India is fast emerging as an eminent economic power in pursuit of developed nation status. With more than 7% actual growth rate

²Upinder Singh, A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.563.

³ Subramanian RR, 'India Pakistan China: Defence and Foreign Policy', IDSA, Delhi, page vii.

⁴ Pant, Harsh V, "The Pakistan Thorn in China, India's Foreign Policy", IDSA, Delhi, 2012, Copyright # 2012 Center for Strategic and International Studies.



annually, India has the fastest growing economy, and is in effect the engine of world growth. China on the other hand is battling an economic slowdown and growth challenges. Other advanced economies as well as the USA are facing the prospects of a recession with significant economic slowdown. **The border issue and India's growing alignment with the US are the principal concerns agitating China apart from economic competition.** In the global geo-strategic environment, owing to a variety of political, economic and security reasons, China is also facing a measure of isolation.

5. Contextually, geo-economics has risen to rival geopolitics as a strategic essential in the emerging world. Primacy of economic growth necessitates new technologies, large resources, integrated supply chains, markets and willing partners, which in turn enjoins higher levels of economic interdependence. Post the Covid period, where India China trade reached a record USD 136 billion in 2023, **there is a measure of interdependence manifesting in India-China relations, despite the acrimony and competition in the geopolitical domain.**

The Emerging Strategic Environment in the Regional Context

6. China's security concerns and geopolitical objectives are increasingly becoming a function of its economic growth needs, security of its global supply chains through the Indian Ocean, claimed territories in the South and East China Seas with their vast EEZ connotation and the Taiwan issue. **GDP growth needs have therefore acquired primacy of place in China's geo-political exertions.**

7. However, China is facing enhanced challenges on both the strategic fronts. The economy is under strain with increasing debts, frustrated BRI projects, and less than 5% growth rate. In the security domain its overtures across the eastern seaboard have remained fruitless owing to opposition by the US Inc. **In relative terms, the boundary issue with India has lower importance for China.**

8. While the traditional security and geo strategic issues pertaining to Taiwan, South China Seas and border with India persist, **China appears disinclined to precipitate conflicts and situations, which may affect their economic growth adversely.** With US now adopting a more proactive approach in supporting Taiwan, the security challenges for China are likely to increase.

9. Notwithstanding the emerging security situation, the China-India trade and economic relations continue to increase despite Doklam and the Galwan incidents in 2017 and 2020 respectively. India is an important factor in the growth matrix of China and enhancement in India-China relation is mutually beneficial to both countries. **Both sides appear to have recognised the importance of insulating the growing interdependence in trade, from the incidents along the LAC.**

10. India China relations also are a function of the South Asian security dynamism. On India's West, Pakistan continues to struggle internally with fundamentalism and failing economy. Its unwarranted indulgence in affairs of Afghanistan and India now appears economically unsustainable. The aspiration to emerge the leader of the Islamic World has had its adverse repercussion in terms of souring of relations with Saudi Arabia and other OIC members. The tag of state sponsorship of terrorism is increasing the isolation quotient of Pakistan.

11. Post withdrawal of US led forces from Afghanistan; there has been a dramatic reversal of Pakistan's fortunes. The worsening Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, with a security only content, and improving Afghanistan-India relations, with an economy focused content, is a manifestation of the growing importance of economy over traditional security issues at the geo-political level.

12. Post abrogation of Art 370 and 35A, Pakistan appears to be floundering for an appropriate response. Owing to unavailability of any other credible leverage against India, Pakistan is likely to continue sponsoring terrorism in J&K and may again revert to trans LC firing in support of infiltrating terrorists across Line of Control. **Pakistan's proxy war may continue to simmer for some more time.**

Growing Irrelevance of Pakistan in the Indo-China Matrix

13. India's relations with China are also a function of Pakistan's inimical designs. In tune with the global trend of economic matters acquiring center stage, the politico-security biased Pakistan-China relations are likely to erode in scope and gradually get subsumed in the larger economic paradigm of the countries. Since the present economic content of Pakistan-China transactions is small with an unpromising future, the strength and intensity of Pakistan-China cooperative arrangement is destined to be restricted in scope and longevity.

14. Pakistan is unlikely to halt its strategy to seek parity with India by trying to destabilize India. **Pakistan's intransigence in the politico-military domain through terrorism may therefore continue, but the cost of such activities are becoming prohibitive and unsustainable.** With

We have had three wars with India, & they have only brought more misery, poverty, and unemployment to the people. We have learnt our lesson, and we want to live in peace with India, provided we are able to resolve our genuine problems.

Pakistan PM Shehbaz Sharif in an interview with Al Arabiya TV, Dubai, quoted by Times of India, 17 Jan 2023

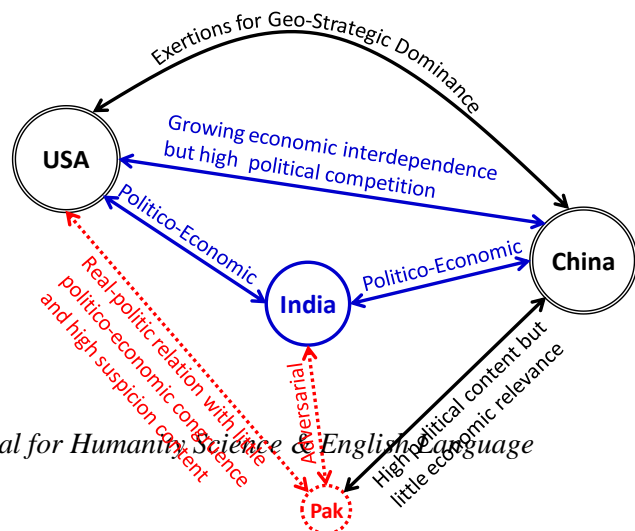
growing realization of non-attainability of aspired results in J&K through terrorism, the focus of *jihadi* activities has turned inwards and terrorist related violence is increasing in Pakistan, which in turn is accentuating internal fault-lines and destabilizing the Pakistan state.

15. As China grows economically, it is likely to exert for larger geostrategic space. Its transactions with US are likely to retain their confrontationist format with constraining impact on both its security and economic potential. **Pakistan may continue to be employed as a security hedge, not only against India but also against USA.** Despite these limiting factors, China is likely to grow economically, which will continue to bestow upon China a measure of advantage over India.

16. China's emerging policy towards India has two opposing viewpoints; a desire for friendly ties to focus on economic progress and the US, and concurrent hostility due to conflicting and competing agendas in the security and economic domains. China will therefore, only selectively support Pakistan's narrative on geostrategic issues until the same does not impinge on China's interests and their views on larger Global issues, inclusive of India.

17. Revocation of the Art 370 and 35 A has substantially mitigated the proxy war challenge of Pakistan into an internal security issue. On the other hand, China's security compulsion with respect to Taiwan

Geo - Strategic Cauldron : Regional Dimension



India is capable of swinging the balance of power, in favour of either USA or China

The 'swing' potential of India is a significant geo-strategic factor emerging in the regional milieu

and contest for the island territories has not diminished. Pakistan's internal as well as external security challenges have increased owing to growing Balooch and Taliban insurgencies. Resultantly, while China and Pakistan will continue to face increased and diverse security challenges, the security challenge for India is likely to decrease.

Emerging Geo-Economic Realities

18. The economic prowess now acquired has catapulted India into a pivot position, wherein the cooperation and alignment with India will bestow upon USA, EU or China a higher degree of politico economic as well as geostrategic stature. In the contemporary security domain, especially in respect to the Ukraine issue, this is amply evident in the manner both Russia as well as the US and EU are pursuing India's alignment to their cause. In the economic domain too, wherein China is exerting for a higher space (above USA) in the world arena, both sides are wooing India's indulgence in their respective economic space (indicative diagram placed alongside). Consequently, in the contemporary world milieu, India has acquired the pivotal position to catalyze the growth of its chosen partner, both in the security as well as in the economic domains. It will therefore be in the interest of the emerging and growing economies to align their growth model with that of India. In the case of China, the significant growth in merchandise trade with India is reflective of China having already acknowledged this reality. US and EU are also already cognizant of the emerging economic prowess of India.

19. The above emerging economic reality, when viewed in the context of the emerging geopolitical advantages to India wherein its Jammu and Kashmir challenge is on the decline but the Tiwan challenge for China is on the rise, indicates a more potent geostrategic position for India in relation to China. Contextually, India has acquired adequate leverage to facilitate or frustrate the economic as well as security related exertions of China in the geo economic as well as in the security domain at Global levels, both in the short term (2030 - 2035) and long term (2040-2045), with direct impact on Chinese geostrategic aspirations. Cognizance of India's potential in the security as well as the economic domains is consequently very important to China. With sustenance of even 7% to 8% economic growth, India's leverage in the geo strategic arena is likely to further grow and ultimately subsume the factors and issues precipitating conflict and acrimony in the security domain, including the border issue.

Investing in Good Neighbourly Relations with China

Reduce Apprehension Paradigm

20. Over the past decade, as India and China made steady progress in economic development, their relations have been steadily declining, owing essentially due to certain misperceptions in the fields of geostrategy, geoeconomics, growth competitiveness, foreign policy objectives and most importantly, their security related objectives, resulting in large measure of distrust and apprehensions. The fundamental misperception is the inability to comprehend each other's international ambitions, thereby

China and India have the ability and wisdom to find a way for friendly coexistence between neighbouring major countries and jointly create the 'Asian Century'.

Ma Jia, Chinese charge d' affairs, New Delhi, on the 74th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Times of India, 27 Sep 2023

yielding to the fear that their foreign policies are targeted at each other. China's collusion with Pakistan and India's apparent closing up with the US and the West did not help in allaying these misapprehension which persists in some measure till date despite improved bilateral transactions in the economic and trade fields. **Since India is now growing faster than China and India's interactions with the US and the West is on the path of enhancement, it is India which will need to initiate measures to ally mispalced apprehansions.** India will need to transparently and proactively articulate its benign and inclusive growth objectives as also more vigorously propound its geostrategic aims which are understanding of China's aspirations.

Balanced Pursual of National Interests

21. While China will remain a competitor in the long term, the benefits of cooperation has also been recognised by both sides. The essential dilemma in pursuing a path of economic cooperation, while concurrently pursuing a path of competition in the security domain will therefore remain a major challenge for India. The benefits of shared peace, shared growth, and cooperative format of economic development and geopolitics needs to be articulated and proliferated at global levels. **India's China strategy has to therefore strike a careful balance between cooperation and competition, as also between the economic and politico-security interests.** Given the current and future asymmetries in

capabilities and influence between India and China, it is perhaps the single most important challenge for Indian strategy in the years ahead⁵.

22. India has acquired adequate potency in the regional security as well as in the global economic domains. India should now strive for greater pro-activism and dynamism to pursuit of national interests, with special focus on the immediate neighbourhood. **Counterbalancing China's security and territorial ambitions, eradicating terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and investing in shared economic growth are keys to actualization of India's interest in the region.** While pursuing a collaborative format of economic growth, India should remain steadfastly aligned to its core National Interests.

Capability Building Concurrent with Improving Relations

23. Despite an impressive economic growth and improved security capabilities of India, China still possess an advantageous status. Coping with asymmetry in all its dimensions is the principal exigency for India. India will need to improve capabilities in the security and economic domain to reduce the asymmetry with China, which has chances of escalating apprehensions. While a measure stability is associated with the present state of asymmetry which should be utilised to enhance capabilities, rather than indulge in contest with (only) sub-competitive capabilities. The notion that India's efforts at capability enhancement will generate suspicion in China, while true to some extent, may not be entirely accurate. In August 2022, China placed on hold the India – US proposal to list Pakistan based Jaish e Mohammed (JeM) deputy chief Abdul Rauf Azhar as a UNSC designated terrorist, seeking more time to study the proposal, but did not veto it. Historically also, in the deliberations on the Border Defence Cooperation Agreement of August 2013, China agreed to drop the clause on freezing existing troops and infrastructure along LAC, thereby acquiescing to India's planned capability building in the security domain and raising of a Mountain Strike Corps⁶, which was specifically planned for deployment against China. Also, China did not object vigorously to Indian side's

⁵Shyam Saran and others, 'Nonalignment 2.0, A foreign and strategic policy for India in the twenty first century' 2012.

⁶Pandit Rajat, "India China set to ink Border Pact – New agreement to prevent face-offs", Times of India, 03 August 2013, page 17.

infrastructure and capability improvement along LAC in the Doklam and the Ladakh areas consequent to the prolonged faceoffs in those areas. **Peace and stability in India-China relations is accordingly equally or even more important to China than any antiquated notion of military dominance or support to Pakistan.** Issues of congruence and cooperation should accordingly be proactively pursued and enlarged for improving bilateral relations, without restricting the capability development measures in the security domain.

Economic Leverage

24. In the context of India's and China's growth requirements, where India has developed better cooperative arrangement with the US and the West, China is facing constraints owing to issues in the politico-security domain. Consequently, the Chinese need to cooperate with India is perhaps as compelling as that of India cooperating with China. Given that Indian market, specifically the consumer goods and infrastructure sector, is likely to be in the trillion dollars region in the next few years, China would obviously have a keen interest in expanding access to it. India should perceive Chinese economic interest as a source of leverage for trade-offs in other favourable sectors, including politico-security concessions in areas of interest to India. **The ability to leverage access to Indian markets in order to secure investments and access to sophisticated technology to develop domestic capacity is essential.** India should strive to attain the competitive edge in global markets, both in quality and costs. The 'Make in India' initiative should be pursued more vigorously. Also, as wages rise in China and their manufacturing sector loses its competitiveness, India should increase investments and focus on enhancing its own manufacturing sector aimed at transforming India into a global manufacturing hub.

Conclusion

25. In the emerging milieu, India needs to pursue a path of economic cooperation, concurrent with ensuring its security interests and balancing the security matrix. Such an approach will however remain a major challenge for India. **While the benefits of shared peace, shared growth, and cooperative format of economic development and geopolitics may be easily appreciated by both sides, India's China strategy has to also strike a careful balance between cooperation and competition, as also between the**

economic and politico-security interests. Given the asymmetries in capabilities of India and China, it is perhaps the single most important challenge for India in the years ahead.

26. Owing to certain misperceptions in each other's security objectives, a measure of distrust persists in India China relations. Measures to ally the apparent misperception of India's global ambition by underscoring its benign nature and 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' character of India's foreign policy merits consideration. **Good neighbourly relations with China is in the domain of the possible and India should pursue the option, but with care and caution, taking cognizance of India's core national interests.**

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